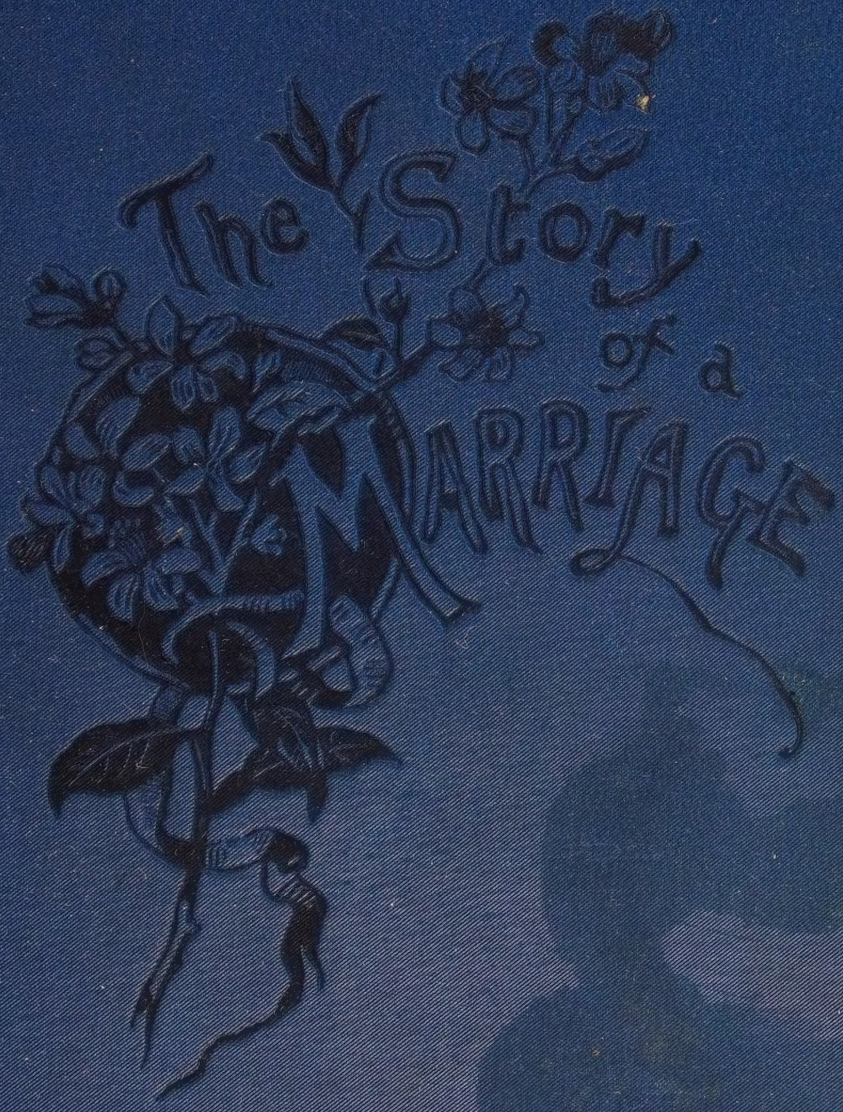
The Story of a Marriage



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THE

STORY OF A MARRIAGE

VOL. III.

PRINTED BY
SPOTTISWOODE AND CO., NEW-STREET SQUARE
LONDON

THE

STORY OF A MARRIAGE

BY

L. BALDWIN

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

London
WARD & DOWNEY
12 YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN
1889

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THE THIRD VOLUME

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THE

STORY OF A MARRIAGE

CHAPTER XXV.

IN CONGENIAL SOCIETY.

'. . . When I consider what swimming clothes and cork waistcoats I possess for the deepest floods, in the self-contemplations of the Emperor Antoninus and in Arrian Epictetus, neither of whom she is acquainted with either by name or by the binding, and what good firemen these are to me when I get into a conflagration of anger . . . while she must let her anger burn down without any assistance; verily, I ought rather to be ten times milder towards her, instead of being more angry.'—JEAN PAUL.

IT was a hot summer's afternoon as Laurence walked wearily up the steep garden path, with his straw hat in his hand and his moist brow bare to the breeze. He looked a much

older man than he was; the experience of the last twelve months had done its work upon him, and the effect was seen in a harder expression of face, and in a less buoyant step and air. As he neared the house he frowned unconsciously, and threw his head back impatiently as though he were pushing some unseen obstruction from his path.

Before entering the house he glanced at the window-sill of the library, where it was the postman's habit, on a fine day, to leave the letters, and save himself the trouble of delivering them at the front door. There were two of them that afternoon, and taking them up Laurence entered the house with them in his hand. The letter in the large envelope, sealed with the Stapleton crest, and directed to himself in a firm, delicate hand, was from his sister, and as he opened it he was aware of a pleasant perfume of Russia leather that was always associated in his mind with Norah's stationery. The other letter

presented in every respect a marked contrast to its fellow. It was from Mrs. Jarvis to her daughter, Mrs. Temple. The address was so ill-spelt and illegibly written that it was a marvel how it had ever found its way to its destination. It was sealed with the impression of a thimble in bronze-coloured wax, and the whole smelt strongly of cheese, owing to Mrs. Jarvis's habit of keeping her writing materials in the pantry.

Laurence stood and read his letter in the open air, and as he read he sighed and smiled. It was a very affectionate letter, such as his sister used to write to him before the shadow of his marriage had come between them. It was an invitation for him to come and visit her and her husband; and Mrs. Stapleton proved the strength of her affection for her brother by the violence she did to her feelings in expressing a hope that his wife might be induced to accompany him.

Laurence gently shook his head as he

folded the letter and put it in his pocket before going into the house.

'Here is a letter for you, my dear,' he said, as he entered the little parlour, where Bessie was arranging flowers in a china bowl on the table. Mrs. Temple received so few letters that she was a little excited by the unusual event, and Laurence smiled at the awkward haste with which she tore open the envelope.

'It's from mother,' she said, as she seated herself in the rocking-chair to read the letter slowly and carefully; 'it's taken her a pretty time to write, I know.'

As Bessie read, the curves of her handsome mouth softened, and her fine eyes gently dilated. Her husband did not speak to her, for the expression he loved to see would leave her face if she looked up at him, but he watched her with quiet pleasure.

Bessie was seated on the very chair that he had hoped would be her throne. If she

one day sat there with a child on her lap, would her fair face grow tender and womanly, he wondered? The letter that moved Bessie so much because it came from the home she had left with indifference, but that she was now at last beginning to value, ran as follows, though its spelling cannot be attempted :—

'Shelton Nursery Gardens:
'June 23rd, 188—.

'My dear Daughter,—I hope this finds you in good health, as, thank God, it leaves me at this present. Father thought as you'd like some news from home, or else you know as I'm not one as holds much with letter-writing. The blue Berkshire sow has nine young ones, seven of them as like the mother as one pea is to another, and two of them white, and stays by each other, and doesn't seem the same flesh and blood. Little Jack's lost his top front teeth, and hinders him a good deal, so as he can't speak plain, nor take

a round bite out of his bread and treacle, as he's so fond of. He's got five and sevenpence in his money-box, but father says his savings aren't half what his was when he was Jack's age. Father says as Jack's had too much bread and milk and bacon to eat to be sharp after saving. He says there's nothing like being clemmed to teach a boy to scrat for himself. You'll be sorry to hear father's low in his spirits. Rents has took and fell, and he don't get but two and ninepence a week for the cottages, where he'd used to get three and sixpence regular, and tenants thankful to pay. Now he says it don't hardly keep him in shoe-leather going round collecting his rents. Old Keturah Crump, as frightened you and Harriett when you was children thinking her a witch, fell down Harbottle's cellar-flap on Saturday night, and took out seemingly none the worse. Mr. Blenkinsop has the shaking palsy very bad, and Mrs. Rundle has got twins. It's a dying world.

Mrs. Cottle's little girl has a scald head, but I tell her it's better out than in. Father's afraid I shall want a girl to help me when the Alderney's calved, and the butter-making comes on, and you not here. You don't tell me nothing about your house, nor how many servants you keep, nor nothing about yourself. If your spirits is low, now you're a lady and time to notice 'em, a drop of old-man tea is a fine thing for 'em. There'd ought to be a bush of it growing in your garden, but father'll send you some if there isn't. Father's love and mine, and little Jack's to Aunt Bessie, and duties to Mr. Temple; and when are you coming to see us? Your old cat Tib is dead, poisoned I doubt. I heard it making an ungodly noise under the window in the night, and in the morning if it wasn't there, laid dead like a Christian, all bent backwards, and its tail like a poker. So no more at present,

'From your affectionate Mother.'

When Bessie had read her letter, and rose to make tea for her husband, tears were running down her cheeks.

'There is no bad news from home, I hope?' said Laurence kindly.

'Oh, no, nothing of that; but it's nearly a twelvemonth since I've seen father and mother and the old place, and it's so dull here. Sometimes I feel as if I should go wild, with nobody to speak to all day long but Hester.'

A few months ago and Laurence would have thought this was a fitting opportunity for impressing upon his young wife that the dulness she complained of was in herself and not in her surroundings; that, unless she bestirred herself to attend to her duties and to interest herself in the lives of others and in the work going on around her, dull she must feel and dull she must be. But he had realised of late increasingly how powerless he was to guide or to help her. Her sullen nature was inaccessible to him, and he had

not found the key with which to unlock the poor and narrow heart. Certain words of Borradale's had borne fruit, and Laurence had begun to see that Bessie was as unhappy in her marriage as he was himself; and pity for his young wife in the life she found so blank and purposeless succeeded to irritation and unjust displeasure.

'If you would like to go home to see your parents and the old place, pray do so,' said Laurence kindly; 'and I will go and visit my sister while you are away. We shall both be the better for a little change. You should have gone before if I had known that you wished it. There is so little I can do to give you pleasure.'

Bessie wiped her eyes as she said, somewhat tartly, 'You could give me all the pleasure I want if you chose. You could live in a fine house, and let me dress like the Miss Blandons of Shelton Hall, and take me out in an open carriage.'

'If you want all that from me, Bessie, I fear you have married the wrong husband.'

'No need to tell me that, Mr. Temple; I found that out for myself long ago. Many a wife would make you say what you did with your money, that you grudge to spend it on me and on a house not fit for a gentleman to live in. It's enough to drive a woman wild to see the great house that I'd a right to turned into a hospital, and rows of nasty pale-faced children's faces looking out of what ought to have been my drawing-room, and the drive where my carriage should have driven up covered with bath-chairs and cripples on crutches! Mother 'll think you're mad when I come to tell her, for I've been ashamed to write about such doings,' and Bessie, glowing with passion, fairly gasped for breath.

Laurence held back the reply that rushed to his lips while he looked at the fair fury before him.

'Did you think I shouldn't have made a good mistress of a big house, and ordered my servants about like a lady that was born to it?'

'I think you would have taken to it at once.'

'There, only hark at you!' she exclaimed in tones as nearly shrill as her round voice could produce. 'You say yourself that I should make a good mistress of a big house, and yet you keep me out of my rights! You deceived me when you brought me to this little poky place, that you thought was good enough for Terah Jarvis's daughter; but let me tell you it isn't good enough for Mrs. Temple. You deceived me, I say!' and Bessie lashed herself into a fury against the resistance offered by her husband's calm patience; but now she was rewarded. She had struck him on a sensitive point, and she saw him quiver. The shaft had struck home.

'If any woman in the world but yourself

had spoken to me as you are doing now I would never speak to her again. You are throwing wild, wicked words about; you are like a child playing with fire; you do not care what harm you may do,' and Laurence, whose passion was rapidly rising, by a strong effort stopped himself, overcome by the pity and the ignominy of the scene.

'Do not let us speak to each other like this, Bessie. If we cannot be happy together, at least do not let us quarrel;' and he spoke very gently.

'Quarrel, indeed! I never quarrelled with any one in my life,' she said, with a hard laugh. 'It's other people that quarrel with me; and for one that's all for peace and quiet you're very free with bad words, calling me names like that.'

A few days later, and husband and wife were both again in their old homes, with nothing to remind them of each other's existence. Indeed, in returning to their friends

and to the unchanged aspect of familiar things, all tended to make Bessie forget that Laurence had ever crossed her path, and to deaden Laurence's sense of the irrevocable nature of the step he had taken since he was last at Coombe Delaway.

It was a sultry evening in July, and Laurence and Helen paced to and fro on the broad terrace at the front of the Manor House, as they had often done before. Laurence walked with downcast head and hands lightly clasped behind him, and Helen, with upturned face, was watching the young moon rise above the oak woods that overhung Coombe Delaway. Laurence had surrendered himself to the happiness of the present. He ignored the past, he did not anticipate the future; enough that he and Helen walked side by side, and for him the rest of the world simply did not exist. Pleasure enough for him merely to hear her voice, to listen to her light footfall, to know that she was near him.

It was the first time they had met since they bade good-bye to one another at the Crown Inn nearly a year ago; and though in the interval Laurence had irrevocably severed himself from Helen, yet he had met her as though he had only been absent for a day, and neither of them had alluded to his marriage.

Till he thus met Helen in the old home Laurence could not have known how surely the last year had done its work. Not only had his brief span of married life entirely disillusioned him, and cast Bessie down as a shattered idol from the pedestal on which she had never sought to be elevated, but his heart had turned to the woman whom he had preferred to all others. Laurence had cared for Helen more than he knew; and it was only his preconceived ideas on the subject of marriage that made him think she could not be his wife, and led him to cultivate as friendship a feeling that would quickly have ripened

into love. In the arrogance of youth he had been hypercritical; and while he admitted to himself that Helen was a jewel, still he would prefer a jewel with a simpler setting. If he could find a diamond in the rough —a Helen Wentworth in a humble rank of life—then he would be his own artificer, cut and polish the gem he had discovered to his own liking, and devise its setting as he thought fit. Egotism, pure egotism, this.

The summer twilight deepened, and its tender dusk was silvered by moonlight; not a leaf stirred, every sound was hushed, every bird was mute, and still Helen and Laurence paced to and fro on the terrace. Their conversation glanced lightly from one subject to another. Laurence told Helen of the return of his friend from Australia, and of Norton's engagement to one of Borradale's sisters; and though their conversation was wholly impersonal, Helen was uneasy at heart that she and Laurence had taken each other up at the old

point, without any word of recognition that he was now a married man. Their mutual silence about an irrevocable fact that must henceforth define the nature of their intimacy was repugnant to the simple integrity of her nature. She wished that Laurence would mention his wife, even while she dreaded to hear him utter her name. It was bewildering and shocking to Helen to be with Laurence again on the old terms, as though life were still full of all blessed possibilities for her, when the knowledge of his marriage lay all the time like a load at her heart. She did not know how to introduce Mrs. Temple's name into the conversation, but she thought how bitter it would be to her, could she know that her husband was with his friend again, and had not a word to tell her of his young wife.

The mention of Borradale and Norton naturally led them to speak about the time that the three friends had spent together in

the cottage at Shelton, and then Helen saw that her opportunity had come.

'How little you could tell when you tried that fantastic experiment, that it was leading you to your wife, whom you might not otherwise have met!' and she was glad that the shadow of the projecting porch hid her glowing face as she spoke. But she was horrified when Laurence turned towards her and said earnestly:

'I wish to God I had never seen Shelton! Helen, do you remember the afternoon at Poges Court, when I came to say good-bye to you before I went to Shelton? I see now what then was hidden from me. I stood at the meeting of two paths, and I chose the wrong one. I believed it to be the path leading me whither my best aspirations tended, but I was lost in a fog. I am punished bitterly in my marriage for a mistake which, foolish as it may have been, at least was not ungenerous.'

Helen's heart beat almost to suffocation, and she pressed her hands upon her throbbing breast, before she could control her voice to reply.

'Laurence,' she said, very softly, 'you must not say this to me. Both men and women make mistakes that ruin their lives, but they must not complain. We both—I mean every one has his own burden, and your burden is one that no woman can help you to bear. I know that if you have drawn misery upon yourself you have done it through an excess of generosity and kindness, but you will always show courage and cheerfulness to the world. Laurence, the next best thing to being really happy, is not to let it be suspected that you are unhappy;' and she raised her dark eyes to him with a tender, courageous expression.

'You are right, Helen, you are right, and I thank you for rallying my courage, instead of offering me sympathy, which a man does

not deserve who has drawn his fate upon his own head. But, Helen, continue to be my friend, for friendship is all that I have in the world now,' and Laurence took her hand imploringly.

'Yes, I will always be your friend;' and, disengaging her hand from his, she left him, and stept from the outer dusk and moonlight into the drawing-room, brilliant with many candles.

'Why, my dear child, what is the matter —you are deadly pale?' said Mrs. Stapleton, rising from her work-table, and taking Helen's cold hand in her warm ones.

'Yes, it is odd I should be so cold on a warm summer's night,' said Helen, with a smile, intended to be cheerful and reassuring, but which failed to be either the one or the other. 'I should like to put my things on now, dear Mrs. Stapleton, if I may.'

'But, my dear child, the carriage is ordered for ten o'clock, and it is not yet half-past nine. If you leave us so early your

aunt will think that you have not been a good little girl, and that we have sent you home in disgrace.'

Helen smiled, this time a real smile, and put her arms round her friend. 'You know that I love to come and see you, and that you are the greatest comfort I have in life, but this evening I would rather be anywhere than under your kind roof; you must let me go.'

Helen's white face looked so imploring, that Mrs. Stapleton ordered the carriage at once, and said, 'You are a dear, unaccountable creature, but you shall have your way.'

On this very same warm evening in July, at home again in her father's cottage, Mrs. Temple was enjoying herself as she had not done since her marriage. It was supper-time, the pleasantest, merriest hour in the day, when work was over, and the little party at the supper-table were secure from interruption. Little Jack had been put to bed early by his Aunt Bessie, in spite of the grandmother's

entreaty that he might be allowed sit up for once, to taste the roast duck, and Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis, Bessie, and Job Tolley, were seated as of old at the kitchen table. Job Tolley was not present on that particular evening in the character of an invited guest, but he had dropped in towards supper-time in an elaborately casual manner, with a long tale of grievances to impart to his friends. He met Bessie with well-feigned surprise.

'You here, Mrs. Temple! well, to be sure, this is a pleasure;' and no one would have supposed that he had met her the previous evening on her arrival, and talked with her for a few minutes before Terah Jarvis, bewildered and out of breath, entered the station, late, to look for his daughter.

All was over that day between Job Tolley and his employer. The dazzling vision of partnership, which Tolley had discovered could only be realised by son-in-lawship, had faded away. Never should he see gleaming

in the market-place, in huge gold letters over the shop window, the names of the long-desired firm, 'Harbottle & Tolley.' Job Tolley had grown moody and irritable of late. Amelia Harbottle's attentions no longer soothed, but annoyed him, and he made it rudely apparent that he neither cared to court nor to be courted by her. Poor Amelia had worshipped Tolley for years as her ideal of manly beauty and sparkling wit, and she was so pained by the change in his behaviour that she unbosomed herself to her father, and besought his intervention.

The paternal aid was immediately forthcoming, and with the more readiness as Harbottle, unknown to Amelia, was courting the draper's widow at the opposite side of the market-place, and was urgently desirous of settling his daughter, as a necessary step in the direction of his own marriage. Harbottle asked Tolley point blank what his intentions were with regard to his daughter, and, his

pale face flushing at the thought of the spirited part he had acted, Job Tolley told the Jarvises the reply he had made.

'I said to old Harbottle, "My intentions with regard to your daughter is to keep out of her way as far as possible, for her attentions is a deal too pressing for me." I never see a man in such a rage when he heard that; so I told 'im what I thought of 'im not offering me the partnership, and trying to lead me on like that about his daughter, and he says to me: "Sir, your language is unworthy of a cheesemonger and a gentlemen!" and I says: "Sir, there may be two cheesemongers present, but there is only one gentleman; and, if you'll take his advice, you'll choose your next assistant with appearance and manners that's not likely to prove too attractive to Miss 'Arbottle,"' and Job Tolley ran his moist red hand through his moist red hair, and looked round the table for applause.

Bessie laughed as heartily as her parents

at the vulgar story. She had acquired nothing of her husband's refinement of mind and manner, and she was more cordially happy in Tolley's noisy, vulgar society than she had been since she left home.

'O Mr. Tolley,' she said archly, 'would you have given it father like that if he'd asked you what your intentions was once upon a time?' and Bessie looked so handsome it was maddening to think she was no longer Bessie Jarvis. They grew merrier and merrier round the supper-table, till, when they had all had a glass of hot punch, Bessie suggested that they should make believe it was old times come back again.

'Let's think that Tolley's at Harbottle's still, and going to be a partner, and me at home not married, nor going to be, but just plain Bessie Jarvis ——'

'Plain you never was,' broke in Tolley gallantly. 'Handsome Bessie Jarvis you should say!'

'Well, then, let me pretend to be handsome Bessie Jarvis again;' and to perfect the illusion she drew her wedding ring from her finger, and slipt it into her pocket, and laid her girlish-looking hand demurely on the table, near to Job Tolley's big red fingers. But her father caught sight of the unseemly play.

'What mountebanking is that I see with your wedding ring, madam?' he asked sternly.

'Oh, nothing, father; I only took it off for fun.'

'Only took it off for fun! There's wives as need to wear their rings in their noses, same as the pigs, to make 'em remember themselves. You put it on again, Miss, and see you behave accordingly!' and Terah looked sternly at his daughter as she drew her wedding ring from her pocket.

'Here, you put it on my finger for me,' she said unabashed, offering the circle of gold

to Job Tolley, and pointing her taper third finger towards him; 'it needs a little push to get it on.'

What would Laurence Temple have felt could he have known that his young wife made a coarse plaything of the symbol of her married troth, and had enticed Job Tolley to put her wedding ring on her finger, in vulgar travesty of the sacred moment in which he had made her his wife before God and man?

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE WITNESS OF THE CLOUDS.

The winter following the strike at Smokington was a hard one for Tim Ballinger. Times were bad, and men who were in work had no mind to risk losing it in the uncertainty of trade disputes, so there was no vacancy for Tim's kind of skilled labour. Nor was it different elsewhere, so far as his own class of work was concerned, and Tim tramped on a vain quest through the iron districts of Staffordshire and South Wales. Then, rather than be idle and earning nothing, he put his hand to anything that offered, to the roughest, coarsest labour that is done about an iron-works.

Tim, who, as a highly skilled workman, belonged to what one may call the aristocracy of labour, at first suffered a bitter pang of wounded pride when by his reverse of fortune he found himself stoker to a smelting-furnace, when he knew how to work the ore as well as any man living. But in a short time true pride came to his help, and in its robust presence false pride dwindled away and disappeared. Tim was too proud to be dependent even on such a friend as Laurence Temple, who insisted on paying his rent as long as he was out of employment, and he kept himself by any work he could find to do, however mean, and every penny he could screw out of his slender earnings he sent home to Mrs. Brimer and little Polly.

Tim found out many things in his time of adversity. One of his most astounding discoveries was that it is possible to live and work hard on less food than three huge meat meals daily, with occasional carnivorous

'snacks' between, which hitherto he had been used to consider as the least amount of nourishment on which body and soul could be kept together on amicable terms. In his changed estate Tim thought himself lucky if he could vary the monotony of his midday meal of bread and cheese with a sausage or a little bacon, and he ate his meagre Sunday dinner of bloaters with a rapture of enjoyment he had never felt when he had his savoury roast beef as a matter of course.

We cannot follow Tim's wanderings and his hard experiences, which lasted six months, till one joyful day he was recalled to Smokington to take the place of a puddler who had died suddenly in the works next beyond his old one, which still stood empty. Mrs. Brimer and little Polly welcomed their dear Tim home again rapturously, and when the first fervour of his reception was over, and there were scarcely any more questions that could be asked, the old woman, with a delicate-minded

pride, bade him look into a cracked teapot on the mantelshelf, where he beheld untouched every penny he had sent home during his wanderings.

'Why, mother, whatever have you and the little wench lived on?' he exclaimed, as he emptied the heap of coins into his horny palms.

'Daddy Tim wants to know what we've lived on, Polly, while he's been away,' said Mrs. Brimer, appealing to the little girl. 'We've lived on what my two hands has earned,' she said triumphantly; 'and what we couldn't get we did without cheerful, though, but for Mr. Temple's kindness, we should ha' been pinched now and again.'

'Old woman, you're a rare one you are, and I'm proud of you; but spend your savings on yourself and the little wench, for I've got work now as'll keep us all. I'll write and tell Mr. Temple, he'll be glad to know, and I'll ask him to come and see us

again in the home he's helped to keep together.'

Tim Ballinger went to his work a proud and happy man, and when he came home at night, and had washed and rested himself a little, Mrs. Brimer had provided such a meal as he had not even smelt during his long absence from home. The first Sunday after his return Mrs. Brimer stayed indoors all day that she might devote herself, body and soul, to the fatigue and delight of cooking a particularly savoury dinner and supper for her dear lad, and Polly was sent to the Sunday school in the afternoon that the house might be quiet for Tim to enjoy a nap. But in the evening Daddy Tim and the little wench had a wild game of romps together, that worked Polly up to a frenzy of excitement, so that Mrs. Brimer bade her sit down to cool herself, and reflect upon her conduct, after which her supper of bread and treacle was given to her, and she was put to bed. Thereupon a

welcome silence fell upon the kitchen, and the old woman proceeded in peace with her preparations for supper.

But scarcely were Tim and Mrs. Brimer comfortably seated at the table drawn up by the fire, and the smell of fried onions penetrated into every corner of the house, when Polly's voice was heard from the bedroom above crying dismally, 'The bogies, the bogies! O granny, the bogies!'

Mrs. Brimer rose hastily, went to the foot of the stairs and shouted into the upper regions, 'You 'ush there, with your bogies! Go to sleep, naughty gel! If you lie abed staring i' the dark it serves you right whatever you see! Shut your eyes and go to sleep, I say!'

'The little wench ain't frightened, is she, mother?' asked Tim pausing, knife and fork in hand, before beginning his supper.

'Frightened?' said the old woman scornfully. 'Not no more frightened than you nor

me! It's all her deepness. She didn't have no bogies when we'd nought but dry bread for supper, but a smell o' fried onions 'll bring her a churchyard full of 'em! She remembers one night as you had her down and give her a bit o' sausage, when she cried out wi' a dream as the black man 'ad got her, and she thinks you'll have her out o' bed again if she makes noise enough. Forbid as I should speak ill o' the dead, that can't give it me back again; but I doubt the little wench takes after her mother, as was a young, giddling thing.'

'I daresay Polly 'll grow up a good girl,' said Tim consolingly, as he drew the pickle jar towards him.

'You daresay! Pity but what you can't be sure, when you see what pains I take with the child. If she isn't calling out again! My word, if I have to go upstairs to her, I'll teach her how to see bogies!'

'The little wench ain't all in the dark, is she?' asked Tim, whose soft heart was

moved by her cries, and who secretly wished that he dared fetch her downstairs to taste the pork and onions on this his first Sunday supper at home ; 'she ain't in the dark, is she?'

'Wheriver else should she be if she ain't in the dark?' said Mrs. Brimer tartly. 'Who are we to go flying i' the face of Providence with lighted candles, when night was made a purpose for darkness?'

'O Daddy Tim, come and take me from the bogies!' and a sound was heard of little bare feet pattering about overhead Tim threw down his knife and fork, jumped up from the table, and mounted the stairs three steps at a time, and Polly sprang into his arms at the bedroom door.

'Why, my little wench, there ain't no bogies! Whatever can ha' put 'em into your head?' and he carried the frightened child downstairs to the light, and warmth and savoury smells of the kitchen, where she sat

on his knee, hiding her tear-stained face and dazzled eyes on his shoulder.

Mrs. Brimer was displeased, but she understood perfectly when remonstrance with Tim would be unavailing, so she reached down her shawl from the back of the door, and wrapped it round the child to keep her from catching cold, saying as she did so, 'When I was a little gel I'd no kind granny to tell me to hold my noise when I cried out i' bed, nor no Daddy Tim to set me on his knee and feed me off his plate when I was naughtier than usual.'

'We won't call it being naughty, will we, Polly?' said Tim, putting a morsel of roast pork into her willing mouth.

'Aye, but it is naughtiness in her, and nothing else, as makes her cry out in a good warm bed, and you and me close by. It was different wi' me when I was a little gel, I can tell you. I slep' all alone by myself in a big room wi' a chest o' drawers at the foot o' the bed that when I'd put out the candle took

and swelled seemingly till it nigh touched the roof, and when I screamed out mother 'ud come up wi' a light and there stood the chest o' drawers as nateral as could be, and when I told her what it had been a doing, I was smacked for telling stories, but as soon as ever mother 'ud took away the candle, it was at it again, swellin' and swellin'. When I couldn't a-bear it no longer, and got up and tried to strike a light, then I was beat for playing wi' fire.'

'Granny, you should ha' kept your eyes shut, same as you told me, and then you'd ha' seen nothin',' said Polly, who had now waxed warm and confident.

''Ark at 'er now—did you ever hear the like for peartness?' said Tim, bestowing a loud kiss on Polly's rosy cheek. 'I doubt the little wench is getting a'most too clever for you and me, mother.'

This incautious remark of Tim's recalled Mrs. Brimer to a sense of her duty, and, sum-

moning to her face an expression of severity that was never long absent from it, she said, shaking her head, 'You do spoil that child shameful, Tim. You must leave off praising her to 'er face afore she's a big gel. Young women can't stand no praise. It turns their heads, and they're up in the boughs directly. But it's different wi' old women; they can stand a deal of it, and the more you praise 'em the tighter your buttons is sewed on, and the browner your onions is fried—it all comes back to you again in blessings. And now Polly must go to bed, bogies or no bogies, and if you take no notice o' them they'll take no notice o' you, and you'll see nothin' uglier than yourself, I'll be bound. What, you as is such a bold gel i' the daylight, learning all the rudeness you can, and putting orange peel where folks 'll tread on it and come down, and sliding o' the pavement like any proper tom-boy, you to be afeard o' bogies? I niver 'ear such nonsense. There, kiss Daddy Tim and

come along o' me, and lie that quiet as 'll give us a chance to forget you for ten minutes,' and Mrs. Brimer took the child in her strong, wiry arms to carry her upstairs to bed. But Polly, grown bold and merry with sharing Daddy Tim's hot supper, clung to him, and slapped his face and kissed the place to make it well again—a lively sally which never failed to delight and charm him.

'Ain't she a little woman all over, with her slaps and her kisses?' said Tim, looking at the child with fond admiration; 'she'll make some young fellow sigh and set his porridge down before she's so much older, will the little wench.'

Mrs. Brimer shook her head grimly as she took Polly half laughing with fun, half crying at being torn from Daddy Tim's knee to be consigned to the company of bogies in a dark bedroom, and drew the shawl tightly round the child, while she administered a rebuke to Tim.

'For shame of your face, Ballinger, talking to a little gel i' that way! A little woman, is she, with her slaps and her kisses! A bold-faced jig, I say! Whativer would you think o' me if some night when you come home I took and gave you a slap o' the face, and kissed the place to make it well, instead of settin' your supper down before you?'

'Why, mother, I should think what a' old fool you was!'

'Aye, and I should be, too. And there's no knowin' what I might ha' done if I hadn't been whipped out o' my naughty ways when I was young; but if you talk that scandalous to the little wench, she'll grow up so as one house won't hold her and me.'

'How you do carry on over nothing,' said Tim testily, feeling, for him, quite keenly the strain of Mrs. Brimer's society, whose virtues were not the small and oft-recurring ones that sweeten daily life, but on a colossal scale,

best appreciated when contemplated from a distance.

Tim's letter was duly written to Laurence Temple, and forwarded to him at Coombe Delaway. It was brief, as were all Tim's written communications, but it was gratefully affectionate in tone, and contained the good news that at last he had work, his wanderings were at an end, and he was at home, and he urged Temple to come and see him and Mrs. Brimer and the little wench now that they were happy again; and he added: 'I'm on the night turn this week, so I shall have time in the day to see you and welcome you.'

Laurence rejoiced to think of the oddly composed family that so little sufficed to make happy and prosperous, and he was glad that he had had the means as well as the will to help to keep the wolf from the door of such a home as Tim's. He was prompt in action, and no sooner had he resolved to go and see Tim and Mrs. Brimer than he decided to do it at once,

while he was taking a holiday, and the evening of the following day found him in the dingy manufacturing town of Smokington.

Though Laurence was familiar with the aspect of the town, coming to it as he now did from the unsullied freshness of the country, its grimy darkness struck him afresh with dismay. It was a soft and humid night, and the smoke vomited forth from a hundred hideous chimney stacks could not rise in the damp air, but brooded black and motionless over the town, forming another and a gloomier canopy beneath that of the grey clouds. Laurence left his bag at the inn, and then set forth at once for Tim's new place of work, following the course of the barge-laden canal, which would lead him straight to his destination.

He hurried through a squalid district, where the lamplighter was beginning his evening round, and dirty children were running races in the mud, when, as he was

passing a low public-house at the corner of a street, the door swung open, and a man plunged out of the glare of the taproom into the outer gloom, in his haste almost running against Laurence. He had only a momentary view of him, but though his naturally ill-favoured face was debased by excessive drinking, and by an expression of malignant fury, he recognised Bill Anslow at a glance. The sight of the man recalled to Laurence's mind the strike of the previous winter, and the part Anslow had played in it, and he hoped that the angry feeling had cooled down between him and Tim Ballinger. He looked an ugly fellow to have for an enemy, living close to one's elbow. His cap was drawn over his brow, his hands thrust in his coat pockets, and he was going in the same direction as Laurence, but walking so fast that he soon out-distanced him, and was lost to sight.

Laurence pursued his way by the canal side till he gained the outskirts of the town,

where the iron works were no longer crowded together, but stood singly, sending up their volumes of smoke and flame, and rousing the echoes with the rattle and clang of the rolling-mills, each throwing up a lurid glare from its furnaces on the low-hanging clouds overhead. He passed Calder's works, standing black and ghostly, the big hammer silent, and the fires quenched; and he thought of the loss and suffering entailed on men willing and able to work which the absence of smoke and noise signified. But so the strikers had willed that it should be.

This time Laurence had no introduction to the firm that employed his friend, and he was uncertain whether without one he would be permitted to enter the works; but he soon discovered in a friendly chat with the watchman that the regulations were not so strict but that he might be allowed to see Tim for a quarter of an hour between the heats. While the men were at work, of course, friends

might not be with them, and under no circumstances were strangers admitted at night, it was stated on the notice board ; but the letter of the law is accommodating, and allows of a variety of interpretations.

'You keep on straight past the charcoal heap, sir, and you'll find the puddling furnaces to the right, and Ballinger's is the first of 'em.' And thus directed, Temple walked along the iron path that vibrated to the thunder of the steam-hammer, on through streams of red light from the glowing furnaces and the dark tracts of shadow that lay between.

As he turned the corner by the great mound of charcoal a furnace door was suddenly opened, darting a shaft of light into the black mass, and revealing clearly as in a flash of lightning Bill Anslow's haggard face, wearing an expression more terrible than Temple had ever seen, and yet mingled with it a wild, affrighted stare. It was gone in an instant, as though devoured by the surround-

ing darkness, and Temple instinctively sprang towards the spot where Anslow must be ; but he was nowhere to be found. He had either rushed round to the other side of the heap of charcoal, or he had flung himself on it where the shadows fell thickest, and was invisible against its blackness.

Temple was troubled by what he had seen. It boded no good for Tim Ballinger that the only man who hated him should haunt the spot where he was, and where Anslow, having no right to be, must have entered by stealth. He resolved to tell Tim at once, and put him on his guard. The moment in which he had seen the terrible face, called out of the surrounding darkness by the glare of the furnace, had sufficed to stamp it indelibly upon Temple's mind. It was the face of a man, probably mad, but certainly ferocious, relentless, and dangerous as a wild beast.

Tim Ballinger was sitting on the edge of a wheelbarrow, eating his supper, with his

handkerchief spread on his knees, when he caught sight of Temple approaching him. He rose, set the basin containing his supper on the ground, grasped Temple warmly by the hand, and, his rugged face beaming with delight, gave him a welcome that was worth travelling a hundred miles to receive.

'Why, Mr. Temple, who but you would ha' thought o' coming to see me here! It's hearty and friendly of you, it is, and I take it kindly. God knows what me and the old woman and the little 'un should ha' done without a friend like you these six months past! I don't know how to thank you, sir; I can't find the words to,' and there was a moisture in Tim's eyes more eloquent than any speech could have been.

'There, go on with your supper, Tim; you've not too much time for it, and things will be equal between us, for when I've lost all my money in farming, which I'm in a fair way of doing, I shall come to you to help

me,' said Temple, smiling, as he seated himself on another empty wheelbarrow, opposite Tim's, and looked attentively at his friend. It was plain to see from Tim's diminished bulk, and the sharper outline and keener expression of his honest face, that he had fed sparingly during his wanderings.

'I'm afraid, Tim, you found yourself out of condition for your heavy work when you came back to it.'

'Aye, sir, the first week a'most sweated me away, and my hands had got nesh and tender like; but I'm getting into it all right now,' and he showed Temple his hands, blistered, burnt, and cracked, so that to a less hardy man than Tim they would have served as a reasonable excuse for not working at all.

While Tim Ballinger was relating his adventures, and Temple appearing to listen to him, he was thinking all the time of Anslow's sudden ghostly appearance, and of the unpleasant fact that he must be somewhere

concealed in the works. At that very moment the malignant eyes might be fixed upon them from some dark hiding place, and Temple instinctively turned and looked over his shoulder, and glanced swiftly round him. 'Tim, is Anslow out of work still?' he said, looking gravely at Ballinger.

'Yes, sir, and likely to be, seemingly. The choice was betwixt him and me for this 'ere job, and the manager gave it me, because I was dead agin that onreasonable strike. It hasn't made Anslow any fonder o' me,' said Tim, smiling dryly.

'Tim, take my word for it, that man means mischief; you must be on your guard against him.'

'So a many has told me,' replied Tim, taking a huge mouthful of bread as he spoke.

'Yes, and I tell you so too, very seriously. I believe Anslow is in the works now. He must have contrived to slink in unseen when the men's suppers were brought in, for I saw

him for a moment in the flash of light from that furnace door. He was crouching down against the charcoal heap, but he was gone in an instant.'

Tim seemed a little surprised, took off his linen cap, looked inside it, and put it on his head again before he spoke.

'He stands a good chance o' getting chucked into the canal if any of our chaps find him loafing about in the dark.'

'Anslow is much more likely to do an injury than to receive one. Be on your guard, Tim. If human faces mean anything, the face I saw just now was that of a man who would not stick at murder if he had the chance.'

'I don't think he's one to stick at anything, sir, and he's been on the drink now a many weeks. But I think I'm a match for him, he's not so strong as me,' and Tim felt the muscles of his right arm, which still were formidable, though not what they had

been before his compulsory rest from work at the puddling furnace.

And now it was time for Laurence to go and for Tim to begin his labours.

'Good-night, Tim; I shall see you and Mrs. Brimer and Polly to-morrow; and mind what I say, be on your guard against Anslow. That's my last word to you to-night—be on your guard, Tim.'

'Oh, I'll keep a look out, never fear. I don't think anyone will meddle wi' me, and don't you think too much about that chap, sir. He'd be too much afraid for his own skin to do me a hurt;' and Tim opened the furnace door and let out a stream of blinding light and heat, and Laurence lingered a few minutes to see how skilfully Tim 'fettled' his fire, and to watch the weird effects of light and shade, which possessed a strong fascination for him. The coarse gas flickering in the open air took a faint and sickly tinge in the intense light from the furnace, and

Tim's face and figure, bathed in the ruddy glare, glowed red as if illumined from within, and he cast a great shadow behind him on the background of blended fire and gloom. It was a wonderful effect, and Temple, turning to see it once more, noticed that the clouds above reflected the light from the furnace in a sullen glow.

A distant church clock struck the half-hour of ten as Temple left the ironworks, in no particular haste to return to the inn. He walked by the side of the dark canal forming the boundary of the works on the side nearest to Smokington, and he turned his back on the town and strolled on in the summer night, merely to prolong the time before he must go to rest in the close little room at the Bell Inn.

In the gloom around him, Anslow's evil face rose up before him, branded in his memory. As surely as the countenance of a man can be irradiated by the divine spirit

dwelling within him, so surely can a devil look out from human eyes, for Temple had seen it, and the sight had horrified and saddened him. He wandered by the sluggish water till the rhythmic thumping of the big hammer came to him softened by distance, and the rolling of the mills was only fitfully audible. He had not met a soul on his solitary walk, and before retracing his steps he half crossed an iron foot-bridge that spanned the canal, and from this point of vantage, leaning with folded arms on the hand-rail, he stood looking towards Smokington. Night had thrown her mantle of enchantment over the hideous details of the sordid town, and Laurence, gazing contemplatively upon it, tried by the power of imagination to transform its lofty chimneys into spires, and its great warehouses into castles. The only object on which his eye rested with pleasure was the great tower of the old church, which, built long before the fires were

kindled that had blackened the face of Nature, loomed ghostly and venerable above the surrounding chimneys. Then his vision wandered over the intervening space of straggling buildings and half-finished streets, till it rested on the dark outline of the works he had so lately left, and the steady thump of the distant hammer was borne to him on the air. Suddenly a furnace door was opened, and the fiery glare thrown upward from it was reflected in a dull red flush on the low-hanging rain clouds.

There, projected in gigantic size upon the glowing sky, Temple beheld with amazement the vast and shadowy form of the puddler working at the forge as he bent and swayed himself to his strenuous labour. There was a solemnity and a grandeur in the heroic proportions of the cloud-picture that held Temple gazing spell-bound on every movement of the dark phantom figure, revealed in startling clearness upon the glowing background. But

it was no longer alone. Another shadow dark and formless crept upon the scene, and for a few moments crouched motionless behind the giant form that steadily bent to its titanic labour. Then, swift as lightning, the shadow shot up to gigantic stature, and with one stroke of its uplifted arm felled the bowed figure before it, and both phantoms dropped out of sight, and there remained nothing but a red glow on the grey sky.

'Murder! Murder!' shouted Laurence hoarsely, as he retraced his steps at the top of his speed. 'Murder!' The very clouds had borne witness to Bill Anslow's revenge, and he had seen Tim Ballinger felled by his hand.

CHAPTER XXVII.

NEWS-BEARERS AT MIDNIGHT.

The news that Tim Ballinger was murdered by Bill Anslow spread with amazing swiftness, and, though it was midnight, a small crowd soon gathered round the gate of the works. Laurence arrived spent and breathless at the same moment as the doctor, whom they had fetched from the infirmary close by, and he helped to lay Tim on a soft bed of straw, while they examined him to see if life still lingered in his maimed and bleeding body. He had been felled by a blow dealt him over the head with one of his own puddling bars, which Anslow had stealthily taken from the tank where it was cooling, while Tim was

working with his back towards him. Though none of his fellow-workmen had seen the blow given, there was not the shadow of a doubt as to who the murderer was. Tim had not an enemy or an evil-wisher in the world except Bill Anslow; and though none of the men had seen him about, nor could he be found, though every way out of the works was stopped while minute search was made for him, it was certain that Bill Anslow was the murderer.

'He can't ha' gone far,' said one of the search party when they had ransacked every hole and corner; 'very like he's jumped on the barge alongside the wharf, and is hiding among the coals;' and a rush was made for the canal. Woe betide Bill Anslow if Tim's fellow-workmen take him red-handed!

Laurence stood speaking to the watchman in a low voice in the midst of loud and wild talk around him.

'I knew of this horrible thing before you

did. I saw it all reflected on the clouds as I stood on the canal bridge.'

The watchman was not usually a nervous man, but he thought Mr. Temple had gone stark mad, and to appease him he replied in a very conciliating tone,

'Oh, no, sir, you must be dreaming. This 'ere's bin too much for you. We never see nothin' in the clouds.'

'But I tell you, as I was leaning on the bridge and looking at the sky I saw a huge shadow of Tim thrown on the clouds on the red glow from his furnace, just as you see pictures projected from a magic-lantern. I saw him bending forward to his work, and then another vast shadow rose behind him, hovered above him for an instant with uplifted arms, and quick as lightning brought something down upon him with tremendous force, and both the shadows of Tim and Anslow dropped out of sight, and left nothing but the red glowing light on the clouds.'

Now the watchman had never happened to notice the unusual effects of shadows thrown by the glare of the furnace on the low-hanging rain clouds, for it is a phenomenon depending on rare atmospheric conditions, so he disbelieved it entirely. Laurence was so positive and eager he did not like to contradict him, lest he should irritate a madman, but he smiled in a way that said 'poor gentleman' as plain as any words.

'But look here, if I had not seen it for myself, how else could I have known that Tim was murdered, and have rushed here full speed, raising the alarm as I ran?'

'Yes, sir, it's queer, uncommon queer, and so is dreams in general.'

'I see you don't believe me,' said Laurence. 'Will you think I was dreaming too when I saw Anslow hiding by the charcoal heap, and as I lost him again directly I told Tim I had seen him, and put him on his guard?'

'Sir, I won't express no opinions noways; but what I say is, I wish you'd told me instead of 'im as you'd seen Anslow in the works.'

'I wish I had, indeed, but I thought it was enough to warn Tim.'

'Not it, sir; he don't know what fear is. You couldn't make 'im believe as Anslow meant 'im serious harm; though when Tim was put on here instead of Anslow, he swore he'd have his life if he waited seven years for a chance to kill him. Well, I hope this 'ere 'll prove a hanging job for Bill Anslow,' and the man shook his fist in Laurence's face as he spoke.

'No, I hope to Heaven Tim may live, and the law doesn't inflict capital punishment, you know, for an attempt at murder,' said Laurence.

'Then that's where me and the law don't think alike,' said the watchman excitedly. 'They'll take and hang a chap when he's had his murdering will and killed a fellow right

out, but if he's made a mess of it and only crippled him for life instead o' murdering 'im, then they let 'im off with imprisonment, for not having done his work better!'

Already one of Tim's mates had run home and sent his wife to break the news to Mrs. Brimer, and to tell her that Mr. Temple would come to her as soon as possible. Contrary to her usual habit, Mrs. Brimer had sat up late that night finishing some sewing that she was intent upon, and as she took off her spectacles and folded up her work the tall clock in the corner of the kitchen solemnly struck the hour of midnight. The old woman was placid and happy, and full of thankfulness that Tim was at home again, and his weary wanderings at an end. She opened the front door to see if it was raining, and to enjoy a breath of fresh air before she went upstairs to bed; and as the mild air fanned her face, and she looked up at the grey summer sky, that was not really dark the whole night through, the old

woman thought it must be a sad or a sinful heart that would not let one sleep when God Himself was hushing the earth to rest. Her mind was peaceful and quiet, and free from presentiment of impending evil. She noticed some neighbours speaking together in low tones at their front door, and as it was an unusual thing at so late an hour, she thought, 'There's illness i' that house, trouble I doubt for someone, but not for me; for I've got my Tim safe, and I've no one to worrit about now he's at home again,' and she closed and locked the door, and went upstairs to bed.

Little Polly slept in Mrs. Brimer's room, and it was her custom every night when she had drawn the blankets comfortably over the sleeping child to say her prayers by the side of the cot. But she had scarcely knelt down when she heard a hasty knocking at the front door, and a handful of gravel was thrown against her window. She hastened downstairs with no apprehension of sorrow for herself, but won-

dering what service her neighbours would require of her—whether she was wanted to assist at a birth or a death; and she opened the door to see who was there.

Two women with shawls thrown over their heads, and almost breathless with running, entered the house and closed the door behind them; and then, both speaking at once in hurried gasps, they told her that Anslow had murdered Tim in the works. They made no effort to lessen the shock for her, nor did they attempt to break the news gently; it had to be told, and they told it. But they were not prepared for the effect it had upon the old woman, as the dreadful meaning of their words rushed upon her. Her face grew ghastly white and pinched; she staggered as though she had received a blow, and, sinking into the nearest chair, she sat silent and rigid, not a word or a cry escaping her pale lips.

Her two neighbours stood by her with streaming eyes, chafing her cold hands, utter-

ing such poor words of comfort as human pity can suggest, and speaking to each other across her of her lamentable state, as though she were deaf or dead.

'She'll have a stroke, I doubt,' said Mrs. Hodgkiss, 'if she don't cry out or speak.'

'Her face is drawed a bit o' one side, I do believe, a'ready,' said Mrs. Polter; 'can't you say summat as 'll stir her?'

Then Mrs. Hodgkiss, who was beginning to feel frightened at the sight of grief manifested in a form that was unintelligible to her, said in a loud voice, with her mouth close to Mrs. Brimer's ear, 'It's the Lord's doings, Mrs. Brimer, it's the Lord's doings, and you must bow to His will.'

Then the pale lips moved, and Mrs. Brimer spoke. 'Don't tell me as murder is the will o' the Lord. I've suffered His chastisements, and I've felt the weight of His hand, and He never lifted it but a blessing fell from it; but this is all sin and darkness, sin and darkness,

and I can't see the Lord in it noways;' and the old woman, who had thought that her weeping days were over, fell into a passion of grief as violent as though she of all mourners had first discovered the fount of tears.

'Adn't I better go and fetch Mrs. Diggles, as sits by her in the chapel, to come and say something comfortable like to her?' suggested Mrs. Hodgkiss to her neighbour.

'No, don't go knocking folks up out o' their beds. She couldn't say nothing better to her than what you've said a'ready, and look how that's set her off.'

'Come, come, Mrs. Brimer, you'll wake the child; you wouldn't want her to 'ear you mourning like that.'

Mrs. Brimer's bitter sobs and cries had died away, but she still rocked herself to and fro with her apron thrown over her face.

'Come, come, Mrs. Brimer, take a cup o' tea, it'll help you wonderful,' said Mrs. Hodgkiss.

'Nay, make it for yourselves, that's tired wi' looking at grief. Tea can do naught for a broken heart.'

'There's a knock at the door; you open it, Mrs. Polter, while I set the kettle on.' And Mrs. Polter opened the house door, and Laurence Temple entered the kitchen.

He was exceedingly pale, and his hair clung dank and heavy to his brow. When he saw Mrs. Brimer's worn and anguished face it was with difficulty that he concealed his emotion. He seated himself by her, and, taking her poor shrivelled hands in his, said gently, 'I have just come from the infirmary, where I went with Tim, and stayed with him till his wounds were dressed and he was in bed. He lives, but he is unconscious, and he is so strong that the doctors say there is a shadow of hope for his life, but we are not to build upon it. I have permission to take you to the infirmary at nine o'clock to-morrow morning to see him; but he will not be able

to recognise you, and you may only go if you can be perfectly quiet.'

'Never fear for me, I shall be quiet enough if they'll only let me see my boy. O sir, I knew that Anslow was a bad one, but I couldn't ha' thought that any creature o' God's making could ha' lifted a murderer's hand against him, that never spoke a harsh word nor did a cruel deed in his life! There's none but me knows the goodness o' Tim; better than my own flesh and blood he's been to me. I've had a husband o' my own, and two fine sons as was crushed i' the pits, and they was none of 'em like Tim—they wasn't fit to stand beside him. Oh, if he dies there'll be but one thing left in all the earth to comfort me afore I follow him to the grave—Bill Anslow will be hung!' And the fire of hate that kindled in the old woman's eyes scorched up her tears.

'Bill Anslow will never be hanged,' said Laurence Temple quietly.

'Bill Anslow not be hung if my Tim dies from his murdering blow! Is justice to leave this wicked world as well as kindness when my Tim dies?'

'Mrs. Brimer, Bill Anslow has been dealt with more promptly than by human justice. He has entered his Maker's presence red-handed from his crime.'

'What! Did Tim's mates fall on him and kill him when they see how he'd used him? Oh, I love 'em for it!' And a dreadful smile, more painful to witness than her tears, shone over the old woman's face.

'No; no man's hand is stained with his blood; vengeance fell on him from Heaven. When he had done his evil deed he turned to fly for his life, to escape from the works before he was seen and recognised. But in the darkness he slipped and fell into the canal and was drowned; and I saw his dead body taken out of the water as we were moving Tim to the infirmary.'

An exclamation of horror broke from the women in the room, but Mrs. Brimer sat silent, with hands clasped and lips compressed. At last, as though speaking to herself, she said, 'The Almighty is just, and if He lets my Tim live He's merciful as well.'

CHAPTER XXVIII.

TWO VERY DIFFERENT WOMEN.

'It is the type of an eternal truth that the soul's armour is never well set to the heart unless a woman's hand has braced it; and it is only when she braces it loosely that the honour of manhood fails.'—RUSKIN.

MR. AND MRS. STAPLETON had formed a very pretty project of spending the winter in Egypt. They were both in high health, and did not in the least require a change of scene or of climate; but they had visited most places of European interest, and now were strongly attracted by the charm and mystery of Egypt. If only Laurence had been free to accompany them how delightful it would have been! But he could not possibly be away from home for so long a period, and even now Lemuel Roach was profiting by his

master's three weeks' absence in ways that he little anticipated. But Mr. and Mrs. Stapleton were determined to take a friend with them on their travels, and they had had the courage to ask Lady Poges to spare Helen for a six months' holiday.

The Pogeses themselves might perhaps have accompanied them but for the serious question of the dogs. Lady Poges had said that provided they could secure a cabin for Nip, Tip, Pim, and Bomba she would venture the voyage, but Sir Stoke swore roundly, with heated countenance and prominent blue eyes, that if she travelled with a single barking beast of any description she should go alone, for he would not be one of the party. As half a year's absence from Nip, Tip, Pim, and Bomba was not to be contemplated, this decided the question so far as Sir Stoke and Lady Poges were concerned, though it did not affect Helen.

At first the invitation for her was flatly

declined, and anyone who did not know Lady Poges as intimately as Mrs. Stapleton would have supposed that the refusal was final, but in reality it counted for very little indeed. It was Lady Poges's habit to meet every fresh suggestion with a negative ; it was her way of greeting a new idea. So Mrs. Stapleton took not the slightest notice of the refusal, and knowing that Helen's heart was set upon it, she quietly returned to the subject at a more favourable opportunity. She had only to convince Lady Poges that none of her comforts would be forgotten or neglected in Helen's absence, and to assure Sir Stoke that his niece required a complete change of scene, and the desired consent would be given.

'It is now a whole week since I spoke to Lady Poges about the Egyptian scheme. I must go and see her again this afternoon. Laurence, will you come with me?' asked Mrs. Stapleton.

'With pleasure, my dear, as it is my last

chance of calling at Poges Court, for to-morrow I must go to Smokington to see how Tim Ballinger is getting on, and when I come back from seeing him I must return to my farm and my work at once.'

The drawing-room and its occupants at Poges Court were but little changed since Laurence Temple's last visit, nearly two years ago. There was the same exhausted atmosphere, heavy with scent, and drowsy for want of the external air, and Lady Poges still reclined on a couch, covered with furs, and raced over by dogs, as though she had not stirred in the interval. By the window, and as far from the great open fire as she could place her chair, Helen Wentworth sat at her embroidery frame, with glowing face and eyes intent on her work. That afternoon the inevitable dogs had been more than usually difficult to silence on the arrival of the visitors, with whom they had stoutly contested the possession of the chairs, while Lady Poges

held up a monitory finger like a bird's claw, and shook her head, and murmured through the clamour of barking, 'Fie! fie! naughty doggies!'

At length, when Nip, Tip, Pim, and Bomba had barked till they were tired, and, still panting from the exertion, had settled themselves, Bomba on the hearthrug, and the three small dogs on various points of vantage offered by the lean recumbent form of their mistress, Lady Poges said with slow emphasis:

'You see I have them at a word. Nothing would induce me to keep an animal that did not render me the most implicit obedience.'

'Perhaps it is as well that you have decided not to take the dogs to Egypt,' said Mrs. Stapleton gaily. 'Dogs are like children: travelling ruins their morals and makes them forget their home discipline. You certainly would lose your control over them if you took them abroad, or if you left them at home for

six months. But that does not apply to Helen. Do you know, dear Lady Poges, that John and I are strongly of the opinion that it would do you even more good than it would do Helen if you will let her go to Egypt with us for the winter? As you are too great an invalid yourself to undertake the fatigues of a long journey, it would be a sort of vicarious travelling for you. Helen would write you charming letters all the time, and she would return with a store of interesting and amusing things to tell you, and she would describe all she had seen so vividly, that as you lie there on your couch you would think that you had made the journey yourself, and she would absolutely bring the Pyramids and the Cataracts of the Nile into the drawing-room to you.' And Lady Poges looked a little anxiously at the carpet. 'I often think that you and Helen, spending so much time together, must occasionally want fresh topics of conversation,' continued Mrs. Stapleton.

'You are quite correct in your idea; but how strange that you should have found it out!' said Lady Poges, turning the jewelled side of her rings uppermost on her thin fingers. 'And you might not suppose it, but Helen is not always so cheerful a companion as I require. Latterly she has been too silent for a girl of her age.'

'Ah, just so; that is because she needs a thorough change to refresh her in mind and body. Think how much you would gain in having her return to you at her very brightest, and with adventures that would last her a year to tell you before they all came to an end. And it would do Timmins good to have the exclusive care of you for a little time; she is devoted to you, and there would be no fear of her running away and leaving you.'

'No, Timmins is very faithful, and, I am sure, would never care to live with anyone else after having lived with me so long,'

said Lady Poges. 'She has as good as told me herself that she could not hope to meet with another lady for a mistress with as many and as varied symptoms as mine.'

Behind the large embroidery frame, that served as a screen between Helen and her aunt, a very different conversation was taking place. Laurence's voice had dropped almost to a whisper, and Helen was plying her needle as if her daily bread depended upon it, and yet her whole soul was absorbed in listening.

'I owe it to you, Helen, that I return to my work and to my home strengthened and determined not to despair, nor to utter unmanly complaints of the life I have myself chosen. You have always appealed to what was best in me; and the other night, when we were talking on the terrace, and I am afraid that I spoke like a weak and disappointed man, you can never know how your words braced me up and invigorated me. Though everyone else should misunderstand the step I

have taken, you, I am sure, have faith in me.'

'Yes, I have perfect faith in you,' said Helen softly; 'but you will have to justify the path you have chosen, or else you must not complain if it seems to others as though you had acted precipitately, and before you could have had much experience in life.'

'Life is not long enough to evolve one's belief from one's experience,' said Laurence, speaking low and rapidly. 'I hold certain principles by which I have ruled my life, and if in applying them I have lost my chance of personal happiness, still I am sure that I am right. What does it matter whether a man is happy or not, so long as he does what he conceives to be his duty? I imagine that at the last great day of reckoning we shall not be asked whether we have enjoyed ourselves, but whether we have done our duty; and we have both of us lived long enough to know that that is not always synonymous with happiness.'

Helen had a side-light thrown on Laurence's meaning from what Mrs. Stapleton had told her of her brother's theory of effecting a social regeneration by means of marriages between the upper and lower classes of society. Ah! what a beautiful idea had Helen been the cottage maiden whom Laurence had chosen for the object of his experiment! But to Helen, as a lady, the notion was preposterous and bordered on the revolting, and she and Laurence could not discuss it together; yet his longing desire to retain her good opinion made him allude to it as though he had explained to her the leading idea of his life.

In the midst of her bewilderment Helen held fast to her faith in the goodness and uprightness of Laurence Temple's intentions. She was sure that, inscrutable as his conduct appeared in marrying Bessie Jarvis, he had acted from motives of which no man need be ashamed—nay, more than that, of which she

believed not many men were capable. And yet she said to herself sadly enough, 'Pity it is that in this jumble of a world the best men should be crazy.'

Laurence explained to Helen his mode of life at Hilbury, and the nature of the experiment he was trying on the estate; and with the egotism of a man who believes that he is rather nearer than anyone else to solving a social problem, he did not spare a single detail, but went into the subject thoroughly and exhaustively. To Helen he could not be tedious, and she listened to every word with interest and sympathy. She spoke little herself, but her few words showed that she perfectly understood all that Temple told her, both concerning the work itself and the underlying purpose that dignified the most commonplace labour. And it was rapture to Laurence merely to be listened to by Helen, for at home his young wife never heeded him, and showed her indifference to anything he

might say, either by assuming an air of endurance, or by bereaving her handsome face of its usual small modicum of intelligence the instant he addressed a remark to her.

Laurence's regret at bidding Helen goodbye was so mingled with delight that she understood him and sympathised with him, that even as he uttered the words there was a radiancy in his eyes that communicated itself to hers. And so they parted, Laurence to return cheered and strengthened to his work, and Helen glad to think that she would presently go so far away from England. She would have set the width of the whole earth between herself and Laurence if she could. In spite of the deep disappointment he had provided for himself in his marriage, Helen believed that only a part of his life was affected by it ; he still had a man's work to do in the world, and a man's strength and will to do it with. While for herself—well, she would go to Egypt and lay in a renewed store of

health and patience with which to return to the society of her aunt, and Nip, Tip, Pim, and Bomba, and to accept life, in whatever colourless form it might present itself, with all the courage she could command.

While Laurence Temple was at Coombe Delaway it happened that Borradale went to Shelton to spend a couple of days with his old nurse Anne Haggart, who had not seen him since his return from Australia. It was always with a feeling of restful satisfaction that Borradale found himself once more in the sweet home-like country round Shelton ; and after sunset on the evening of his arrival he went for a stroll in the familiar direction of Terah Jarvis's nursery-gardens. The road ran for a considerable distance on a raised tract of land that formed a natural terrace, commanding wide views of the fair open valley, through which the river wound westward in silvery curves among the hills. It was a little later in the season than when

Borradale had last been there, two years ago. The hay was cut and carried, the corn was ripening, and the strong bine of the hops overtopped the poles, and tossed and twined their graceful sprays aloft in truly bacchanalian style. The lambs in the meadows by the river-side were grown as big as their mothers, though an occasional flighty race or inconsequent jump betrayed their youth, and showed that they were not as dull or as heavy as their hoarse-bleating dams. It was a clear fair evening, and unusually still. The breeze had died away at sunset, and not a breath rustled the leaves on the huge elm-trees, and the only sounds that reached the ear were the squealing of the swifts as they darted to and fro in the grey twilight, and the soft murmur of the river. A time and a place suggestive of all that is pure and lovely. Borradale met very few people on the darkening high road—only a few labourers going home, and a pair of rustic lovers, the man walking

a couple of yards in advance of his sweetheart, in strict accordance with the ritual observed in the early stages of country courtship.

Borradale smiled to himself as he thought that twilight brings young couples out on a country road as surely as a heavy shower brings out snails; and to confirm the truth of the observation, a turn in the road brought another pair of lovers within sight. This couple appeared to be in a more advanced stage of courtship than the first he had met, for the man was walking with his arm round the girl's waist. For a moment Borradale was amused by the sight; but suddenly his face darkened with displeasure and disgust. The girl was tall, and dressed like a lady; and the man was no rustic, but a vulgar, smartly dressed fellow, who looked as if he had come from behind a counter in the nearest provincial town; and as he overtook them in the dusk he recognised in the lovers Mrs. Temple

and Job Tolley. Bessie's dishonour was a matter of indifference to Borradale; but that his friend should be duped and disgraced by her was intolerable. His first impulse was to seize Job Tolley by the collar and hurl him across the road; but he reflected that happily he was not Bessie's husband, and that any display would be absurd on his part. But they should know that he had seen them; and, stepping briskly forward in the gathering twilight, he passed close to Bessie, as he did so raising his hat and saying, 'Good evening, Mrs. Temple.'

Bessie's surprise and terror were very great and very genuine. She turned pale, and started forward quickly as Tolley's arm slipt from her waist and he lagged behind, slowly following her in the dusk.

'O Mr. Borradale, how you have frightened me, to be sure! I had no idea you was in these parts!'

'It ought not to frighten you to see a friend

of your husband's, however unexpectedly,' said Borradale gravely; 'and if I have frightened you, you have shocked me, Mrs. Temple.' And Bessie understood what he meant, and wished, not that she had not been so foolish, but that Mr. Borradale had stayed in Australia.

Job Tolley had now recovered from the start, and, following Bessie and Borradale with an easy swagger, said as he overtook them, 'A nice evening this for a stroll, sir.' Borradale took no notice of him, but, offering his arm to Bessie in a way that made her take it against her will, he said quietly, 'I will see you home; it is getting late for you to be out'; and he crossed the road with her, leaving Job Tolley behind them.

It was done so quickly, and with such silent determination, that Tolley's rudeness and bluster were simply quenched by it. He had never been so taken aback in his life. He had half a mind to follow them at first,

but Terah Jarvis was not as friendly as he had been, and he knew that he would not be particularly welcome at the cottage. So he turned sullenly back towards Shelton, where he was lodging, relieving his feelings as he walked by vulgar and violent ejaculations.

'Bessie,' said Borradale, when they had walked in silence a short distance, and calling her without ceremony by her christian-name, 'Bessie, when are you going home?'

'Why, this is my home, isn't it?' she replied, with an uneasy giggle.

'A wife's home is with her husband, Bessie. I have known you since you were a little girl, and that fact, together with my friendship for your husband, makes it right that I should tell you plainly that you had better go home at once. And after what I have just seen, I say that if ever you speak to that fellow again you are a bad wife to my friend.'

'You're not going to make mischief between me and my husband over that, are you, Mr. Borradale?' Bessie asked in a cold voice, while she hardened herself against the effect of his words.

'I am speaking to you now on purpose that I may prevent mischief hereafter. Your own conscience tells you how unworthy your conduct is, and I only take upon myself to point out to you what you know already, because you cannot have thought of the risk you run. Bessie, for God's sake, don't throw away the love of a good and confiding man. Your husband loves you and trusts you far more than, I think, you deserve; but try to deserve it, and never betray such trust as he places in you.'

'Why, Mr. Borradale, what ever do you take me for, that you talk like that?' and Bessie gave her head a toss.

'I can hardly say what I take you for, Bessie; you puzzle me a good deal.'

They were now at the garden gate, and Bessie, who was not sufficiently impressed by Borradale's words to be offended with him, said, 'Won't you come in to see father and mother, sir?'

'No, thank you, not to-night.' And they parted in the road, and Bessie entered the cottage alone.

Nothing could have been more alien to Borradale's nature than to deliver a homily to a young woman on her wifely duty; but for the sake of Bessie's youth and ignorance, and his dear friendship with her husband, he had spoken without premeditation, suddenly, and with the same energy with which he would have stretched out his hand to save her from falling over a precipice.

'I feel like my own grandfather,' thought Borradale; 'I had no idea how full of ancient wisdom and morality I was till occasion called it forth. And of immorality, too, I fear; for if Mrs. Temple must misbehave herself, I

had rather it were with any other man in the world than Job Tolley.'

And now that we know Borradale's thoughts, we will briefly glance into the workings of Job Tolley's mind as he retraced his steps towards Shelton, and we shall see that Bessie had succeeded beyond her intentions in stirring his dull, sluggish nature. She had worked upon him by never letting him alone—teasing him, flattering him, tantalising him by her beauty, till she had at length roused a passion in the man, coarse and common enough, but, while it lasted, of masculine vigour and genuine force. Bessie had never meant to make him so much in earnest; it frightened her, and it was very inconvenient. She had worked hard to conjure up a spirit that she was powerless to lay, and she had played with fire till she would be fortunate if she escaped with only a singeing.

'I'm a fool, a confounded fool,' said Tolley to himself, 'hanging on after another man's

wife just because she's got a face, and a way with her that makes a fool o' me. But it's all her fault; she wouldn't let me be. Me out of a situation too, spending my savings in doing nothing, when I'd ought to be laying by every week. It's all along of that Mr. Temple coming here and thinking he was doing something fine and out of the common marrying an honest tradesman's sweetheart. Bessie 'ud a deal rather have married me, if I hadn't been such a fool as lose my chance for want o' speaking out. Women is contrairy pieces. She's kinder to me now a deal than she was when she was Bessie Jarvis, and it makes me mad to think how she's throwed herself away—aye, and me along with her, what's worse. I don't know what's took me, but I can't keep away from her. I'm the same as if I was a mouse as kep' nibbling at a piece o' cheese—no, that won't do neither, comparing a chap like me to a mouse. It's more like a lion and a lamb; but that won't do

neither, for there ain't much of the lamb about Bessie. But I needn't go far to find what I'm like wi' her; I'm just a man as has gone mad over a pretty face, and I'm not the first that's done that by a many, nor I shan't be the last neither. There's times I can't tell whether I hate the woman or whether I love her most. I can't sleep o' nights for thinking of her, and I'm bound to follow her o' days. Curse her! why couldn't she let me alone? And got a husband of her own, too; and it can't come to no good, but where she beckons I've got to follow. It's slavery it is!' And Job Tolley returned late to his stuffy little lodgings, and drank a great deal more whisky and water than was good for him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

TIM CONFIDES IN LAURENCE.

Mr. and Mrs. Temple were at home again; that is to say, they were living under the same roof once more, but with no greater community of interests or mutual confidence than if they had been total strangers. Laurence had returned stronger and calmer in spirit, and more tolerant and patient with Bessie's provoking and unamiable temper. He had taken an outside view of his life while he was free from her irritating presence; he had endeavoured to look dispassionately at the great mistake he had made, and resolved to be as just to his young wife as possible, and as kind as she would allow him to be.

Helen's resolute courage had communi-

cated itself to him, and instead of returning to his home life angry, despairing, and impatient, he determined manfully to endure his daily ignoble martyrdom. But such resolutions are very much like saying to one's self, 'I will not start next time a wasp stings me,' and so long as Laurence was away from Bessie it was easy to think that he would not suffer himself to be irritated by her. But when he was again brought into immediate contact with her dull self-complacency, invincible prejudice, and blind obstinacy, his self-control was strained to the utmost. For Bessie had returned from her visit to the old home with her deep-rooted resentment against Laurence strengthened by Mrs. Jarvis's vulgar and loudly expressed sympathy with her daughter's disappointment. She had carefully enumerated all her grievances to her mother, beginning with the greatest and most unpardonable—the giving away of the big house by her husband in

order that they might live in a cottage. From this evil starting-point proceeded other injuries innumerable, from the absence of the expected barouche and pair with coachman and footman in drab livery down through a lamentable sequence of cruelties and deprivations, winding up with, 'and brass candlesticks, no better than what you've got, mother; and if ever a woman had a right to expect silver it was me,' and the soft voice broke and the fine eyes filled with tears.

'Mr. Temple haven't kep' his bargain with you, my poor girl; that's where it is. He marry you to make a lady of you, indeed! and then takes you to a cottage as no gentleman 'ad ought to go inside! Job Tolley could ha' done as much for you as that, and made hisself pleasanter over it too, I dessay. You've bore it all a deal better than I should ha' done; but a mother's heart must bleed to see you a-behaving like a lamb under the knife.'

Step by step Bessie went over the old ground with Laurence, reproaching him for having deceived her in bringing her to his simple home, and for keeping her shut up in a little poky house, when, if he really was a gentleman, he would be taking his wife about everywhere, and visiting with all the great people in the county. Day and night he steeled himself to endure the ceaseless flow of reproaches and repining discontent, making every allowance possible for Bessie's ignorance and vulgarity of mind.

Laurence did not often lose his temper with his wife, but when he did so, by an evil fate he generally broke down at the wrong moment. A feeling of pent-up irritation, dating back to some provocation which he had borne at the time with apparent indifference, would find expression when Bessie was purely inoffensive in her conduct, and gave her a terrible advantage over him, of which she was not slow to avail herself. But

of one great cause of his young wife's increased unamiability and discontent Laurence knew nothing, and that was her renewed intimacy with Job Tolley. He trusted her fully and freely, and felt no uneasiness in letting her spend a month away from him among her old friends at Shelton. Laurence knew that she was likely to meet Job Tolley, but it was inconceivable to him that there could be any danger in her doing so, after spending a year under influences which, if they had affected her at all, must have made the society of such a man as Tolley completely distasteful to her. It could not enter Laurence's unsuspicious mind that Bessie was constantly comparing him with Job Tolley in disposition, in manner, in personal appearance, and that the comparison was always unfavourable to her husband. She missed Job Tolley's vulgar, familiar, and jocose conversation, which she mistook for wit; and she felt a dull reaction now that she was removed from his coarse

flattery. He, at least, was content with her as she was; he did not worry her as Laurence Temple had always done, wishing to make her something or other that she was not, and did not wish to be. Job Tolley in his way was in love with her simply because she was a beautiful woman, and he did not in the least mind whether she was good or bad, educated or uneducated, and he would naturally have regretted any improvement in Bessie that would destroy her cordial enjoyment of his society. Job Tolley's passion was perfectly intelligible to her, and she was secretly gratified to have inspired it; but her husband's love, that sought to elevate and refine her whole nature, was not only incomprehensible to her, it was distinctly irksome, and wearied her increasingly.

Laurence Temple had outdoor as well as indoor difficulties to contend with on his return from his visit to Coombe Delaway. Things were not working very smoothly

on the farm. There was a good deal of grumbling and shirking of work among the men, and Roach had dismissed the two best labourers on the estate, without going through the formality of acquainting his master with the fact. But it was necessary to Roach that these men should be dismissed, and that at once, for he had reason to believe that they suspected him of robbing Mr. Temple in the purchase of the pedigree bull. Lemuel Roach had bought the animal at a distance for fifty guineas, but as he charged his unsuspicious master two hundred guineas for it, he had pocketed a very considerable sum on the transaction. Whether the men knew anything definite about the matter Roach could not tell, but his conscience took fright at overhearing some suspicious conversation about himself, and it was easy for him, as bailiff, to find fault with their work and to dismiss the obnoxious labourers.

Laurence had a long and unsatisfactory

interview with Roach in his little study, in which he told him plainly that he had overstepped his duty in dismissing the men without saying a word to him about it. But Roach turned the tables very neatly on his master.

'Well, sir, of course if you thinks it right to go away at one o' the busiest times o' the year, there must be some one left to watch your interests, or the whole blessed place 'ud be picked and stole away. And I do feel it hard to be spoke to for being a faithful servant, and sending away skulkers.'

'But Tudge and Gosling were no skulkers, they were both industrious men,' objected Laurence.

'Very like they was as long as your eye was on 'em, sir, and if you'd like to have 'em back on the farm and keep your eye on 'em, I hope you will, and I'll look out for a place, no matter how 'umble, where faithfulness in a bailiff is thought something of.'

'Don't talk humbug, Roach,' said Laurence

sternly, 'and let us go through the accounts together.'

But three weeks had sufficed to confuse them so that three hours' hard work was needed to put them straight, and master and man spent a weary and an irritating morning over the books. When all was at length explained—though not entirely to Laurence's satisfaction, for Roach's evasions and subtleties left a most uncomfortable impression on his mind—he reached his cash box out of the cupboard, and set it on the table.

Laurence unlocked the tin box, and took out his cheque book to write a cheque. While he was doing this, Lemuel Roach had a full opportunity of seeing the contents of the box, in which Laurence very unwisely kept more money than was necessary to have in the house. The bailiff's fingers, that had so lately closed on stolen money, felt as though they already grasped the gold and crushed the crisp bank-notes that were so temptingly

exposed before him. As his master wrote the cheque, and afterwards pressed it on the blotting paper, Roach carefully observed the lock that protected the valuable contents of the cash-box, and from that his restless eye glanced to the lock on the cupboard door. That was evidently a very simple-minded lock, constructed in the confiding belief that it would only have to deal with honest men, so incapable did it appear of resisting either ingenuity or violence. Laurence handed the cheque to Roach, who went about his business, thinking more of certain bye-paths and short cuts leading to wealth, than of the old beaten track tending in that direction, worn with the plodding feet of industry and perseverance.

From August to November Laurence Temple worked early and late on his farm, uncheered by kindness in his home, and striving with all his might to become indifferent to the tempers of his cold-hearted and vulgar wife. The crops were safely gathered in, and exces-

sively heavy autumn rains had turned the fields that had lately smiled and rustled with golden grain into dreary wastes of brown mud. The swallows and swifts had taken their flight, and the cheerful robin sang among the dying leaves, as blithely as the lark carols in the spring. The trout stream by the coppice ran tawny and swollen down the hill, fretting and chafing in its stony bed, and joined by many an impetuous brook that in the summer had dwindled to a mere silver thread. The pretty sloping garden of Pine Hill Cottage was forlorn in its autumnal decay. Yellow leaves were trodden into the miry paths, and withered bushes of michaelmas daisies and tall seeding sunflowers stood in melancholy disorder. For many days the sun had been invisible, or at best had only shed a few tearful rays at noon, while the rain fell continuously. The clouds were vast floating reservoirs of water, that discharged themselves day and night on the sodden earth

without any sign of abatement or exhaustion. The soil was like a sponge, so full of moisture that it could absorb no more, and still the rain fell on the dank ground till puddles grew into pools, brooks swelled into rivers, the hard high roads became watercourses, and the ploughed land a slough of mud.

All outdoor work was at a standstill, and as Laurence was not welcome in his own home when he was obliged to stay indoors, the dreary flood-time seemed to him a fit opportunity to pay Tim Ballinger a last promised visit before he left the infirmary. 'If such weather is melancholy here, what must it be in a hospital? Tim will be wanting a visitor to cheer him up,' he thought. And the very next day being Monday, Laurence arranged to leave home, and as he could not reach Smokington before the evening, he would sleep there, and call at the infirmary in the morning. In the course of the following day he would go from Smokington to London to

see his lawyer, which would save him a journey for that purpose later on, and he intended to return to Hilbury on Thursday.

Temple felt languid and spiritless, and as there was no occasion to hurry, he would take his journey in a leisurely style. Bessie expressed neither surprise nor regret when her husband told her he was going from home for a few days. If she had showed the slightest interest in him and his doings he would gladly have postponed his journey, if it would have given her any pleasure for him to remain with her, and the mere words 'don't go' spoken by his wife would even now have had power to detain him. But Bessie made the few simple preparations for his journey very cheerfully, and she did not appear to mind being left alone in weather that kept her a close prisoner to the house.

'Don't get wet through in the rain while you are away,' she said; 'it isn't everyone would dry your clothes for you so often as

I've done lately.' And then, unable to deny herself a parting fling at her husband as he set forth on his friendly errand, she added, 'What is this Tim Ballinger that you're so fond of?'

'Tim Ballinger is an ironworker, a puddler, as I have often told you.'

'Well, I couldn't be expected to remember that, not having kept such company myself. I do sometimes wish you knew some gentlefolks, though I suppose you wouldn't be happy with them.' And these were Bessie's farewell words.

Tim Ballinger had been three months in the infirmary since the terrible attempt on his life, and he was now making progress towards recovery. He was able to sit up daily in an armchair, and thus to enjoy a survey of the ward from a fresh point of view. Time did not hang heavily on his hands. He had not noticed the dark skies that frowned down on him through the tall, narrow windows of the whitewashed room, and the sound of the

steady downfall of torrents of rain in the silent night had not kept him awake for a single minute. Tim found ample interest and amusement in watching his fellow-patients in the ward, and something more than either in following Nurse Tucker's rapid movements with his eye, in listening to her cheerful voice, and noticing her skill and energy. The strength and agility with which she turned a heavy collier in his bed as though he had been a child in its cradle, called forth a loud and admiring 'brayvo!' from Tim that made everyone in the ward, who was well enough to do so, laugh heartily.

Nurse Tucker was a very ordinary-looking young woman of about eight-and-twenty years of age, fair-haired and good-humoured-looking, but not easy to be remembered in distinction from any other young woman of her height and complexion, except for the one peculiarity of the extraordinary heaviness of her footstep. We have it on Cobbet's

authority, and he was a keen observer, that a quick, heavy step in a woman denotes industry, and if he had seen and heard Nurse Tucker in the execution of her duties in the infirmary ward, his theory would have received confirmation. Those of her patients who suffered from their nerves as well as from broken limbs, groaned as their beds shook to the wonderful thud of her rapid step. But Tim was aware of the noise and vibration merely as a pleasant intimation of the approach of a woman who was beginning to possess extraordinary charms for him.

'You see that young woman there, sir,' he said to Laurence Temple after he had warmly greeted him, indicating by a turn of the eyelid that part of the ward where Nurse Tucker was bending over a patient's bed, 'do you see that young woman, sir?'

Nurse Tucker's elephantine tread had announced her presence to Laurence from the moment in which he had entered the ward,

and his chair had vibrated to it in a series of brief shocks, but he had not as yet looked in her direction.

'You mean the nurse with the heavy feet, Tim?'

'Yes, that's her. Don't she step like a queen? I never hear a woman put down her foot like her. Her name's Tucker—Jane Tucker,' and Tim sighed lightly as he spoke. 'Jane isn't a name I've been used to think much of. 'Ad an Aunt Jane once, p'r'aps that's the cause, but somehow it sounds quite different now. And Tucker don't sound the same as it used to, neither. There was a fried-fish shop kept by a chap called Tucker down by the works, but I never thought much of the name till I knew it was hers.'

'Why, Tim, man,' said Temple, laughing, 'you've fallen in love with your nurse, and, instead of dying in the infirmary, you've made up your mind to get well and be married.'

'That's about it, sir, I believe. You see,

when a chap's got to my time o' life without marrying, a young woman needs to be forced on him like, afore he thinks serious about her. Why, if I did get thinking a bit about a pretty face, just let summat go wrong with my work, or the little wench take the measles or the whooping cough, and it 'ud all go clean out of my head together. But here I've been twelve blessed weeks, and nothing to do but watch Nurse Tucker trotting about the ward, and noticing her ways—and some of 'em is very pleasant.'

'Well, Tim, I hope Jane Tucker will say yes.'

'I expect she will, sir,' said Tim in a low, mysterious voice; 'she's been what I consider encouraging.'

'Ah, in what kind of way?'

'Why, sir, she don't clap a poultice on me that off-hand as she does wi' some of 'em; and when she biles eggs for me and three other chaps, she just puts their eggs all together, any-

how, into the pan, and only does 'em two and a half minutes by the clock; but she takes my egg all by hisself, and biles him a good four minutes, as if nothing was good enough for 'im; so, you see, I've summat to go on.'

'You have, indeed, Tim. I should propose at once if I were you. But what will Mrs. Brimer say, and little Polly?'

'Oh, the little wench 'll take to her right enough, but the old lady won't. But I shall tell her as she must manage to put up with it somehow, and Jane 'll take the heavy washing off her, for she ain't as strong as she was. Mrs. Brimer's a good bit shook and daunted; what wi' me being so long out o' work, and then this here bad job wi' me, the old lady's gone down hill a good bit this last twelve months. You may depend on it, sir, as soon as I am well and strong, and back at my work, I shall marry Jane Tucker. She's told me herself she's had enough o' the nursing; it 'ud be a holiday for her to be married.'

'Well, Tim, when I saw you taken up for dead twelve weeks ago I never thought to hear you speak of marrying.'

'No, sir, and I wasn't a likely chap for it, neither. You see, I needed to be half murdered first afore I could bring my mind to think serious of it. But there's summat I want to ask you, sir, if I may make so bold?' And a blush reddened Tim's honest face.

'What is it?' said Temple kindly; 'you know I will do anything for you that is in my power.'

'Aye, you've showed me that, sir. I should take it uncommon kind if you'd go and see the old woman for me this afternoon, when she's alone in the place and the little wench at school, and just tell her from me as I'm going to be married. It 'ud make my going home a deal pleasanter for us all, and I should take it very kind of you if you'd do it, sir.'

'Well, Tim, I'll do as you wish,' said

Temple smiling, and speaking low for fear lest they should be overheard; 'but I think it would be better if you could tell her yourself. Besides, you have not yet proposed to Nurse Tucker, and you can't be sure whether she will have you or not.'

'Oh, no fear o' that at all, sir. I look upon it as a'most settled a'ready.'

'Then, if you feel so sure about it, Tim, I'll do as you wish; but I fear Mrs. Brimer will never forgive me.'

'Thank you, sir, very kindly. The old lady 'll be here to-morrow, and then I shall know how she takes it, and gets used to it like; only I thought, if you'd break it to her, it 'ud help me a deal.'

Temple wished that he had come on a more agreeable errand as he sat at the tea-table with Mrs. Brimer that afternoon. As he partook of her hospitality he wished that he was the bearer of pleasanter news, and he cast about in his mind for the best means of keep-

ing his promise to Tim, and, at the same time, of inflicting as little pain as possible upon the old woman. As the day advanced a feeling of immeasurable fatigue, amounting to illness, was growing upon Laurence, and he felt unequal even to the demand that an ordinary conversation makes upon one's mental powers, and he would rather have lain down and slept than have exerted himself in any way. Mrs. Brimer was much aged and changed since Temple had last seen her, and by the time that Tim was able to leave the infirmary she bore more traces of the terrible event of three months ago than he did.

'Isn't our Tim getting on grand, Mr. Temple? I see him o' Sunday afternoon, setting in his armchair so bold and full of his fun, and that happy it did my heart good to see him;' and the old woman filled her guest's teacup to overflowing as she spoke.

'Thanks, that is more than enough, Mrs. Brimer,' said Temple, extending a deprecating

hand. 'Yes, Tim's uncommonly happy in the infirmary; they have nursed him splendidly.'

'Oh, I've nothing to say agin the nursing, not but what I could ha' done it better myself at home, and the nurses is shameful young for the work,' and Mrs. Brimer pursed up her mouth, and frowned her disapproval.

'Some are rather young, no doubt,' said Temple, adding diplomatically, 'but there was one middle-aged person, a very plain woman, perhaps you know her, she walks very heavily; well, I thought she was a good nurse, and suited to her work.'

'I know which you mean, sir, she tramples round the ward till the beds fair rock again. Yes, she's a plain piece if ever I see one, but I've nothing agin her, she's always been civil enough to me when I've been to see Tim. I mean to make her a present when our Tim leaves, and I've laid by five shilling a purpose as I saved out o' my washing money.'

'That's very nice of you, Mrs. Brimer,

but I do not think, somehow, that Tim would wish you to do it.'

'And why not, Mr. Temple? What's it got to do with our Tim anyhow?'

'It has more to do with him than you suppose,' said Laurence, feeling very guilty as he spoke. 'Tim asked me to give you a message from him, that he was afraid might pain you a good deal at first, but by-and-by he thinks you will be pleased. Tim says he intends to marry Nurse Tucker as soon as he is well enough to work again.'

'O Lord, O Lord! this 'ud never ha' happened if I'd kept my poor lad at home, and nursed him myself,' groaned Mrs. Brimer, with uplifted hands.

'Tim would have died if you had kept him at home; only such nursing and care as a man gets in a good hospital could have saved him, and your choice would have been between Tim dead and buried and Tim alive and with a good wife.'

'Is this what he thinks as he was raised up for from a bed o' broken bones, to go marryin' and givin' in marriage as soon as he can put one foot afore the other?' said Mrs. Brimer vehemently. 'If it had pleased the Lord to ha' took him when he was a groaning heap o' splints and bandages, I should ha' known what had a happened to him; but now there's no saying what the futur' 'll be like,' and the old woman plucked at her apron with agitated and trembling fingers.

'You must hope for the best, Mrs. Brimer,' said Laurence soothingly. 'Come, be thankful that Tim has not fallen in love with a foolish young girl. I rather fancy he thinks of marrying partly on your account. He tells me that Nurse Tucker will be able to relieve you of the heavy work, which he says is beginning to try your strength.'

But he had better not have attempted to reconcile her mind to the hateful idea.

'Tim might as well ha' waited till he heard

me complain o' the work, and then it's little marryin' as he'd ha' been drove to do. Nurse Tucker do my work indeed! Not so long as I can rear up on end! One house won't hold her and me, Mr. Temple. When does a man know when he's well off, I wonder? Not Tim, seemingly. I've been better value than a wife to him these six years past; I've kep' him so as the young women daren't look at him, nor he daren't look at them; no, and he never thought of 'em, and never would ha' done if he hadn't come to lay for months i' the infirmary, wi' nothing to do but make a fool of hisself. I didn't think it of 'im! It's folks as cannot let my Tim alone; first it's the men as wants to murder him, and then it's the women wants to marry him; and what between the men and the women he's in danger all the time. But they've done it now, seemingly; it's all up with my poor lad. I'd sooner ha' seen my Tim's coffin carried out o' the door than see his wife step into the house;

for that would ha' been one trouble and ha' done with it—and besides, buryin' is the Lord's doings and must be borne, but marryin' is a man's own wilful will, and, speaking for Providence, I say as you can't look for no blessing on such carryings on!'

CHAPTER XXX.

NOT EXPECTED AT HOME.

'Why should she refuse a kiss when she was asked? Her little mouth would grow neither larger nor smaller for it.'—*Sidonia the Sorceress.* MEINHOLD.

AFTER leaving Mrs. Brimer to compose herself as best she might upon the receipt of such agitating news, Laurence rapidly grew so unwell that he gave up all idea of travelling to town that night. He was in a burning heat, and his limbs and head ached to distraction. Very likely a night's rest would put him to rights, and he would leave for London in the morning. But Wednesday morning found him totally unrefreshed, and stiff and weary beyond all words. Still, a dogged determination to accomplish the task

he had set himself to do upheld him, and about noon he found himself in a hansom driving through a deluge of cold rain to keep his appointment in Lincoln's Inn, without any very definite impression as to how he came to be there.

Laurence was in a condition more fit to consult his doctor than his lawyer, and how he got through with the interview he did not know; but he supposed that it must have been better than he feared, as no legal confusion ensued from it. When it was over he had but one idea, and that was to get home again as quickly as possible. His wife did not expect him till the next day, and he would not telegraph to announce his arrival that night, as it would startle her less to see him suddenly than to receive a telegram addressed to herself. Laurence hastened to the station in a trembling chill that had succeeded to his feverish heat, and he remembered that, wet and cold as it was when he left

home, he had forgotten to bring a rug with him, and Bessie had not reminded him of it. He was not cold, however, when once he was in the train, for he sat in a closely-packed third-class carriage, wedged in between a stout old farmer and a woman carrying a sharp-cornered basket on the arm nearest to Temple, against which he was pressed painfully every time he fell into a light doze. But she was a kindly and attentive fellow-traveller, and begged his pardon when she swayed against him with her sharp basket; and, observing that he looked ill, she offered him some lukewarm fluid refreshment, which she produced from a pocket concealed in the obscurity of her petticoats. The chief faults to be found with his fellow-passengers were that they were too numerous for the space in which they were confined, and that each was possessed with a dread of ventilation that amounted to a craze. Under these circumstances, and suffering from a feeling of

growing illness, the short journey to Hilbury seemed to Laurence as long and as fatiguing as the journey from Paris to Marseilles, which he remembered making in a French version of the atmosphere that he was then breathing.

It was an unspeakable relief to jump out of the carriage at Hilbury station, and to inhale the moist freshness of the night air. The heavy rain itself was welcome, it would cool him and cleanse him from the odour of hot humanity, which still clogged his senses and oppressed his brain. Laurence drew a deep refreshing breath, and closed his umbrella that the purifying torrents might descend upon him without hindrance, and then, as quickly as his stiffening limbs would allow him, he hastened along the road leading to the steep ascent to the cottage.

He well remembered the walk up the hill-side with his young wife clinging to his arm, how his heart was filled with tenderest love and sweetest hope—love that was unrequited,

hope that was unfulfilled. How full of sorrow the year had been to him, from the deepest sorrow that wounds the soul of a man, down through all gradations of mental suffering to the mean pains and penalties daily inflicted on his sensitive nature by the uncontrolled tongue and temper of a vulgar and unlovable woman. The abiding sense of failure in realising the ideal life was not so hard to bear as the ever-recurring petty vexations, which acted on his mind as sand does on the eyes, and kept it in a constant state of irritation. Great troubles in life are mountains which we must set ourselves manfully to scale and climb over in good earnest; but the small troubles are mean impediments in our path, over which we trip and stumble, and moan or curse as we happen to be plaintive or passionate. If Bessie could have maintained the grace of silence in her married life as she did in her courtship, it would have taken long to disillusion her husband. Never had

woman more recklessly thrown away a good man's love, or less valued heaven's best gift when it was lavished upon her.

As Laurence slowly climbed the hill, urging himself to painful effort with the prospect of rest and shelter so near at hand, a heavy squall of wind and rain almost took him off his feet, and he grasped his hat with both his hands. A little more endurance and he would be at his journey's end, and his aching limbs would rest; and even now as a gusty wind rushed by him, carrying with it the roaring voice of the swollen stream, he saw a friendly gleam of light in the window of his library, as though to guide his painful steps towards home. Bessie did not usually sit in Laurence's room in his absence, but to-night it appeared that she was doing so, and the cheerful glow within looked like a welcome prepared for her husband's return. Then there arose in his mind an unreasonably strong desire that he might find his wife in

an amiable and tranquil mood, and that her words, whether few or many, might be gentle. He had often borne very hard words from her without betraying any outward sign of pain, but to-night he felt that unkindness from his wife would simply unman him. Laurence walked across the garden and approached the cottage from the side where there was no light visible, and in the heavy rain and wind his footsteps were inaudible. As he was about to enter the porch the front door was thrown open, a bright light streamed into the garden, showing the ghostly outline of the bare trees against the darkness, and Laurence heard a loud laugh that caused him to spring back out of sight. Bessie stepped to the entrance of the porch and held out her slender hand into the rain, and Job Tolley, closely following her, put his arm round her waist and drew her towards him, saying, as he did so, 'Come in, dear, come in, you'll get wet with the rain.'

'O Job, don't go yet awhile! It isn't fit to turn a dog out on a night like this!' and Laurence saw through the open lattice-work of the porch that his young wife leaned her head on Job Tolley's shoulder, but the darkness hid from her her husband's haggard face and gleaming eyes that devoured her every look and gesture. Laurence trembled from head to foot, and leaned against the wall for support—they might have heard his laboured breathing but for the sound of the wind and rain.

'And must you really go?' Bessie asked gently.

'Aye, that I must, to catch the last train. I don't want to run no risk of Mr. Temple hearing I've been to see you. Isn't twelve hours pretty well for a visit? And very like Hester 'll tell as I've been here, and your husband 'll get to know about it, and unpleasantness 'll come of it, and I shall have to suffer for it.'

'You suffer for it, you great coward!' Bessie replied contemptuously. 'Why, you'll be far enough away, whatever happens. If anyone has to suffer, it'll be me.'

'Well, all I know is as I'm running great risks for your sake, Bessie. If me and Mr. Temple was to meet, it 'ud be bloodshed!' And Tolley assumed an air of desperate ferocity.

'It 'ud be fiddlesticks,' said Bessie, laughing. 'You're not a fighting sort, Job, and Mr. Temple isn't jealous enough over me to hurt anyone for my sake;' and she would have liked her husband all the better if she had thought that he had been.

Laurence started forward in the rain and darkness as though he must rush into the lighted porch; but by a violent effort he restrained himself. He could not bring his young wife to shame before the vulgar scoundrel her lover, nor could he let him witness the anguish he suffered for her sake.

His brain was on fire; the fierce beating of his heart almost choked him; the darkness was streaked with flashes of light before his dazzled eyes; he was no longer ill. He felt no trace of physical weakness; he could have battered the life out of Job Tolley. The armour of self-control, which Laurence had worn so long that he had come to regard it as a part of himself, fell from him in a moment, and left him unprotected and vulnerable at every point. Love and honour were wounded, hatred and jealousy aroused, and his soul, by nature so calm and gentle, had suddenly become a battle-field where all the primitive passions of man contended.

Bessie had run indoors for a moment, and now returned with her husband's travelling rug on her arm. 'Take this with you,' she said; 'you'll need it in the train. It's Mr. Temple's, and I forgot to give it to him when he went away on Monday.'

Job laughed coarsely as he wrapped the rug about his shoulders. 'Sweethearts are kinder than wives—is that what you was thinking, Bessie?' And he turned and kissed her full on her mouth, and she laughed and dealt him a box on the ear, a repetition of the vulgar comedy they had formerly enacted at her father's garden gate at Shelton.

'What a little spitfire you are! If that's how you serve Mr. Temple, I don't wonder as he goes away and leaves you all alone by yourself.' And Job Tolley rubbed his ear as though it hurt him, and Bessie thought how funny and amusing he was.

When he was gone Bessie stood beside the open door that she might not intercept the light that enabled him to find his way, and she waited till he reached the gate and shouted 'All right.' Then she turned and entered the house, shutting the door behind her at the same instant that Laurence sprang down the path after Job Tolley. Though the

night was dark as pitch he knew every inch of the ground, and on the slope of the hill he overtook and ran violently against the man he was pursuing.

'Hallo! What the devil! who are you?' cried Tolley, staggering to recover his balance.

'I am Laurence Temple,' and he seized him by the collar with a grip like a vice. 'I am Laurence Temple, and I have seen and overheard you with my wife; and I tell you you are a damned contemptible scoundrel!' and he tightened his grasp as he spoke till Tolley was almost throttled.

'Hi! loose that, can't you?' cried Tolley, striking out wildly in the dark.

'You are a contemptible scoundrel!'

'Scoundrel, indeed! That's a fine word to use, when I come here by your own wife's asking!' And Laurence felt there was degradation in touching so base a creature as a man who turns round on the woman he has compromised.

Laurence was fairly carried out of himself

with passion and disgust. 'You are not man enough to understand what a despicable hound you are; words are wasted on you, but you've a hide to feel with, and you can understand that,' and swift as lightning he struck him in the darkness a blow on the forehead that felled him on the spot, and he lay stunned and senseless on the sodden grass. The dead silence following angry words and a heavy blow was so startling that Laurence knelt by his side to listen if Job Tolley breathed. Yes, he was alive, but Laurence knew that it was the goodness of heaven alone that had saved him from the guilt of murder. He had exerted the whole strength of his body and the hatred of his soul in the blow that had felled Job Tolley, and that he had not killed him was because in the darkness he had failed to strike him on a vital spot.

Laurence rose trembling from his knees, with great drops of sweat upon his brow. There was no need to do anything to revive Tolley; the cold heavy rain falling on his

upturned face would soon restore him. 'And he has my rug to wrap round him,' thought Laurence with a bitter laugh; 'he will take no harm, and he can catch a train at his leisure,' and he went away in the dark, leaving him stretched at full length, and beginning to breathe heavily.

After the violent emotion and physical strain through which Temple had just passed, the inevitable reaction followed quickly. The illness that was upon him, and that had only relaxed its hold in the presence of a stronger power than itself, now returned with full force, and trembling with weakness and fever, he staggered up the slope to the garden, feeling that if he did not lie down and rest he must die. But there was no home for him now. Never again could he lie down by his young wife's side. The light shone from the low window under the eaves, and he knew that Bessie was taking down her bright hair and preparing for rest. He could see each familiar

object in the little room that had once been so sacred to him. But now the light from its window guided him to no harbour of refuge, though he wandered in the pitiless rain, stricken with illness and tormented with fierce passion. It was to him no more than a light on a distant shore that meets the sailor's eye when far out at sea.

Bessie's sleep was sweet and healthful that night, for she had never loved anyone but herself, and moral obtuseness prevented her from seeing how she had wronged her husband. Could she have known as she turned on her soft pillow that Laurence was out in the drenching rain, ill and heart-broken, she would merely have thought what a fool a man must be to stay out-of-doors on such a night, because he was in a temper with his wife, when he might have gone to bed comfortably like anybody else.

Chilled to the bone, and longing to throw himself down to rest anywhere out of the soaking rain, Laurence silently tried the front door,

thinking that if it was not locked he would enter without disturbing Bessie and spend the night on the couch in their living room. But the door was duly fastened, and he stood for a minute under shelter of the porch, and then, struck by a sudden thought, he plunged into the darkness and hurried out of the garden by a small side gate leading to the farm. He would spend the night in the barn where he had so often taken his breakfast, and there, trembling and dizzy with fatigue, he would throw himself on the straw to sleep or to die, he did not care which. Laurence felt his way through the darkness till his hands struck against the great doors of the barn. Then he drew the outside wooden bolt, and, partly opening one-half of the door, he entered and closed it carefully behind him, feeling with his foot for the loose brick that served as a wedge against the door inside.

If the night was dark in the open air, within the enclosure of the barn was darkness

that might be felt, and Laurence stepped into it as into a palpable substance. It was darkness that wrapt a man about like a garment, that weighed upon him like a physical terror, that yielded no glimmer of light to the straining eye, but Laurence saw luminous flashes from his disordered brain that fell through the sepulchral blackness like flakes of fire. He flung himself on a great mass of straw, and drew over him an empty sack that he felt for and found in the darkness, and it was sweeter to him than the daintiest linen. When a man is ill all that he longs for is a place to lie down in, and something on which to fling his weary body, and for this purpose a barn is as good as a bedroom, and a truss of straw as comfortable as a spring mattrass. Laurence was indifferent to luxury and to the pomp of wealth, for he devoutly believed that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of riches he possesses. The true and inner wealth consists in love, the love of God and man, and he who loves

most is richest, while he who loves least suffers true poverty of soul. And Laurence had been stripped of the only wealth his unworldly soul coveted. In his marriage with his young wife he had looked for a higher, larger happiness than most men dream of in wedded life. Not only had he loved Bessie passionately for what he believed her to be, but he had loved in her the whole class from which she sprung with a wide embracing affection that drew thousands of his fellow-men to his heart. He had dreamed that together they would live a life of noble simplicity, and, because he was a rich man, he was able to exercise choice as to their manner of living, and he had decided that he and Bessie would dispense with all the trappings of wealth, which, obtrusive and substantial as they are, Laurence regarded as mere shadows and empty nothings. He and his wife would show the world how little those who have the true riches require of the luxuries that are useful to hide

or to decorate misery, but which in themselves are unable to confer happiness.

We know how his marriage, entered into with so much love and exalted hope, had proved from the first a mistake and a most bitter disappointment. Temple, neither beloved nor able to love in the sanctity of home, was a most poor man, whose poverty was beyond the power of any largesse to relieve. No sleep came to his aid on his straw-bed. The torturing pain in his limbs as his wet clothing dried on him prevented him from losing consciousness for a moment, and his brain was working with feverish activity. His sense of hearing became so acute that he heard the least rustle of straw in the furthest corner of the barn above the sound of the pouring rain or the buffeting of the wind against the walls.

Suddenly Laurence was aware of a crackling of straw close to him that was not caused by any movement of his own, and he felt that

something had alighted near his head. His heart beat violently, and, when he saw two blazing eyes gleam from out of the darkness, his dry lips parted with terror, but he could not utter a cry. An urgent mew, followed by loud purring and the rubbing of soft fur against his face, dispersed his fears, and he knew that he was not alone; he had Minty the barn cat, with whom he had shared so many breakfasts, for his companion. She thrummed in his ear, and pushed herself against his face in an ecstacy of pleasure at discovering him, and the tokens of her dumb affection were welcome to him as any spoken words could have been. Laurence raised a hand with pain and difficulty to caress Minty, but she was gone, and he heard her light footsteps pressing the straw. 'Minty, Minty!' he called, and the stealthy footsteps returned through the rustling straw, and something very soft and warm was laid against his ear, and a thin piercing sound issued from it, such as might proceed

from a pin if gifted with a voice. Here was the secret of Minty's rapture. She had found her master to show her kittens to, or rather in the black darkness she had brought them for him to feel. Three several journeys puss made into the recesses of the straw heap, and each time she returned with a kitten, uttering its sharp pin-like mew, and laid it proudly by Laurence's head.

'Good puss, dear puss,' he said, gently touching her kittens; 'I wonder if we shall ever breakfast here again. You are very clever to have such beautiful kittens,' and in her pride and excitement Minty stepped lightly to and fro over her master's chest and shoulders.

Puss had attained to the highest development of which her nature was capable. A divine spark of motherly love glowed in her furry breast; she had no thought of self so long as her hungry, thin-voiced kittens depended on her for their very life; she was wholly

absorbed in the care of her helpless young, and for the time being the common-looking black and white barn cat was neither more nor less than an embodiment of vigilant love.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A NIGHT IN A BARN.

'If I had a mind to be honest, I see
Fortune would not suffer me ; she
Drops booties in my mouth.'
A Winter's Tale.

As LAURENCE lay languidly caressing Minty and her kittens, he was startled by a sound, at first he could not tell of what kind, but he heard it through the noise of the heavy rain and gusts of wind, and it was distinct and different from either. It was repeated several times till there was no doubt about it, someone was trying the barn door, and was pushing against the resistance offered by the brick wedge on the inside.

The door strained and groaned with a more purpose-like sound than the wind alone

had caused, then the obstacle that had prevented it yielding suddenly slipped aside, the door opened, and a man entered, carrying a lantern swinging in his left hand. It was a lantern such as is common enough in the country, containing a piece of candle stuck in a hole cut in a half potato, and though it was a poor and dim light it sufficed to bewilder and dazzle Temple after several hours spent in total darkness. As his eye grew accustomed to the light he looked again and saw the man set the lantern on the floor of the barn, while he stooped down and carefully replaced the wedge, but so much better than Laurence had done it that he shook the massive door vigorously and it stood the test without coming open.

At first the man had thought, when the door offered so much resistance, that someone was in the barn sheltering from the weather, and had wedged it with the brick to keep out the wind and rain. As it, however, gave way

suddenly he supposed he must have left the brick there himself, and that it had somehow slipped and fallen against the door. But it had startled him, and he picked up the lantern and held it high while he looked round the barn to make sure that he was alone. Then he shook the wet sack off his shoulders, stamped the mud from his boots, and stepped into the middle of the barn, and as he did so Laurence recognised Lemuel Roach.

Roach could not see his master, for he was lying bedded in the straw in a dark corner near the wall, with his face hidden by the sack that served him for a covering. Laurence did not speak to him, but, wondering what had brought the bailiff to the barn in the dead darkness of the small hours of the morning, he silently watched his every movement. Roach set the lantern down, and began rapidly throwing aside a heap of folded empty sacks by two and three at a time. When he had cleared them all away he knelt on the

spot they had covered, and drawing the light nearer to him took a large chisel from his pocket and prized a couple of bricks out of their place, and then, laying aside the tool, he lifted something out of a hole in the ground. His back was turned to Laurence so that he could not see what it was that he held in his hands, but on his moving nearer to the lantern he saw that it was his cash-box, and that Roach was about to break open the lock with a large stone. He was both clumsy and noisy in his work, and the barn echoed to his repeated blows, while Minty, rendered highly nervous by the whole proceeding, carried her blind kittens one by one into an obscure hiding-place. Lemuel Roach panted in his efforts for a moment when he was aware of something moving in the straw, but, as soon as he recognised the familiar appearance of the barn cat, he resumed his unskilful act of burglary.

To Temple racked with bodily pain, and

his mind shaken by the severest shock it could sustain, nothing seemed strange that happened on that dreary night. He knew quite well what Roach was doing, but he felt no anger, nor any particular disappointment at the man's treachery. Indeed it seemed as though he was past feeling disappointed in anyone or in anything again. Laurence was even interested in Roach's mode of attack on his cash-box, and he was pleased that the lock resisted his hard blows as a proof that it was a piece of honest workmanship.

When Roach had battered with a flint at the front of the box till he had bent it out of shape, and still the lock did not yield, Laurence was just about to say 'Try the chisel at the hinges,' when, as though the superior intelligence of the master communicated itself to the man, Roach flung down the stone, took up the chisel, and applying it with all his force at the hinge, opened the box as one opens an oyster with a knife. His hand

trembled with the exertion, and he set the cash-box down on the brick floor while he wiped his moist brow before examining its contents. Laurence Temple's eyes were fixed on Roach with such intensity that it is wonderful he should have continued unaware of his presence, especially as he was nervous and apprehensive, and frequently cast uneasy glances over his shoulder. But he proceeded in full faith that he was alone, and still on his knees he lifted the lantern in his left hand so that it shed its light on the open box, which he held clasped to his breast. His eyes glittered with a thief's joy as they rested on the little pile of shining gold coin and roll of bank-notes that he had lusted after ever since he obtained an accidental glimpse of them on his master's table.

As Roach bent over the treasure, experiencing the brief satisfaction which even the devil is honest enough to accord to his servants, a clear voice spoke to him out of

the deep shadow, 'How much money is there in the box, Lemuel?'

He dropped the box and the lantern with a crash, and in the blank darkness that ensued Roach roared aloud with terror.

'If you have matches with you, pick up your lantern and light it again, and mind you don't set fire to the straw,' said the clear voice again.

'Good God! is that you, Mr. Temple? Say it's anybody but you,' and Roach's trembling fingers broke several matches off short before he succeeded in striking one.

'Now do you see who it is?' said Laurence when the lantern was fairly lighted, and Roach was looking about him in wild bewilderment seeing no one. 'Lift the light higher, man, and look in the straw by the wall and you'll find me,' and as he spoke his eyes met Roach's terrified glance.

'O Mr. Temple! whatever brings you here?'

'And what brings you here, Roach?'

'Any other night in my life as you'd took in your head to sleep in the barn, you wouldn't ha' found me here doing this, Mr. Temple,' said Roach trembling with fear.

'I can't tell about that; everything seems possible,' said Laurence wearily; 'but why should you rob me to-night, Roach?'

'O sir! for God's sake give me another chance! Not a penny o' the money's gone, and how I come to meddle wi' it at all I can't think, me that has the best o' characters, and my father a Sunday school teacher and all, and none of us ever been in trouble.'

'I have no time to listen to your family reminiscences, Roach. I am ill, and you must help me. If you want that money you must earn it; you shall not steal it. Go and fetch me some milk to drink, and when you have done that, go to the cottage and tell your daughter to light a fire in the sitting-room at once without disturbing her mistress; and

bring the light near me that I may see what time it is,' and Laurence drew his watch from his pocket with stiff and aching fingers. 'Only four o'clock, and nearly four hours of darkness yet before the dawn comes!'

'Shall I leave you in the dark, sir, while I go after the milk?' asked Roach meekly.

'You will be obliged to do so. And bring a saucer with you as well as a cup, that the cat may have some milk too.'

'And what am I to do with this 'ere?' said Roach looking sadly at the cash-box lying on its side, and at the shining sovereigns that had fallen out of it.

'Put it out of sight that it may make a thief of no one else who sees it,' said Laurence; and Roach threw a sack over it and went to do his master's bidding with a heavy heart, and cursing the ill-luck that had baulked him in only his second attempt at theft on a considerable scale. His first in the transaction of the pedigree bull had been so successful

that on the strength of it he had regarded himself as a made man, but here was a rude check for him. And it would not have happened if Mr. Temple had been like other gentlemen, that you can count on for being in their beds at proper hours like ordinary Christians.

But if Mr. Temple was odd in his ways, might it not in some way turn to Roach's advantage? Perhaps his master's oddity might lead him to overlook the affair altogether, especially as he was ill, and who could tell what a sick man's freak might be? Roach continued his cogitations as he fetched the milk to this effect. He was pleased that he had obtained possession of the cash-box by simple, straightforward means—not by picking of locks and suchlike hazardous methods, but simply by telling a lie to his daughter; and if a man may not tell a lie to his own lawful child, in case of necessity, what's the good of being a parent? he thought. He had gone to

the cottage in the afternoon, and told Hester to ask her mistress for the key of the library cupboard, that he might get out an account-book, to enter some fresh item before the master returned. The mistress was busy with company—and Roach smiled an ugly smile as he remembered this—so she did not come to him herself, but sent him a bunch of keys and told him to find the one that he wanted. Then he had sent Hester out of the house with a message to her mother, while he quietly removed the cash-box, locked the cupboard, and left the keys on the table.

As the result of lifelong small peculations, and the more venturous transaction of the pedigree bull, Lemuel Roach had amassed a sum of nearly four hundred pounds, and if his master's cash-box yielded a hundred and fifty pounds more, as he believed it would, he had determined to go to America and try his luck there in farming on a small scale on his own account. He would rather have remained in

England for the same purpose, but the peculiar circumstances in which he had amassed his capital would stand in his way where he was known. For the present, then, there was nothing to be done but to take the milk to his master in the barn, and then if, after running the risk of getting the cash-box safe out of the house, and hiding it under the brick floor, he was to have nothing more than a sight of the gleaming gold and crisp bank-notes for his pains, his name was not Lemuel Roach.

'How do you feel now, sir?' he asked, as he supported Laurence with his arm, while he gave him a cup of milk.

'Ill, Roach—very ill,' and he sank back heavily in the straw; 'and now give Minty some milk,' and Roach set a brimming saucer on the floor for the cat.

Laurence looked so ill and was in so much pain that the man was sorry for him, even while he hated him for being where he was at that particular time.

'You'd ought to be got home, sir, out of this 'ere cold place.'

'Leave me alone, Roach; I cannot move now, if I die,' said Laurence, with closed eyes; then, worn out with pain of body and mind, he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep—sleep bordering upon stupor.

The rain and wind had now abated, and the silence was only broken by the strident crowing of rival cocks at a distant homestead, and the heavy drip of water from the eaves of the barn. Roach shivered, and, stepping softly from his master's side, set the lantern down, and, approaching the heap of sacks on tiptoe, took one of them, threw it round his shoulders, and wished for the daylight. He was glad that the cash-box was covered up out of sight, for so long as that was the case he considered himself safe from temptation. He knew the extreme generosity of Laurence Temple, and he had little doubt but that, as he had confessed and left the

money, his best plan would be to be very attentive to his master now in his necessity, earn his forgiveness, and wait for a better opportunity of improving his own fortunes. That was as far in the direction of honesty as Roach was prepared to go, for by long wandering in devious paths he had lost the power of proceeding straightforwardly. He sat on the heap of sacks with his arms folded and his head dropt upon his breast, now and then falling into light snatches of sleep, from which he awoke himself with an uncouth snort and start. He rubbed his nose violently, and looked round the barn, everywhere in deepest shade and gloom, except where the lantern shed its circle of light on the brick floor, and where Roach was careful to remain.

It was time that he was out and about the farm; for, though the November morning was dark as night, it was now six o'clock; but he dared not open the creaking door for fear of disturbing his master. How to pass the time

till he should awake? He watched Minty lick the inside of the saucer with her little rough tongue till it was sand dry, and then he rose, and refilled it for her, and sat while she slowly lapped and lapped, as a cat who is replete, but cannot refuse milk. At his feet lay the chisel and the stone with which he had attempted his theft. He might as well clear all up and replace the bricks in the floor, that would give him something to do that would not make any noise. He set to work stealthily, and had soon finished his task in silence, when it occurred to him it would help to pass the time if he were to take just a peep at the cash-box that was covered up among the sacks. He turned his face anxiously towards the place where his master lay, and, the sound of his breathing assuring him that he was still asleep, he drew the box out of its hiding-place, just to take a farewell glance at its contents.

An evil glitter came into the man's eye at

sight of the coveted hoard; his breathing quickened, and he clutched the open box to his breast. Lemuel Roach devoured the gold with his gaze; his thick, unsensitive nostrils dilated to their widest extent, he set his teeth, and the sweat stood in great beads upon his brow. Twice he looked over his shoulder to the spot where Laurence lay sleeping, and he shook and trembled on his knees. He was in an agony, and his guardian angel, having but now interfered on his behalf, and seeing him court temptation again, turned sorrowfully away, and left him to his own guidance. With moist, trembling fingers Roach transferred the gold and the bank-notes to his pockets, and, once more silently taking up the bricks, he stowed the rifled cash-box in the hole beneath and covered all with the empty sacks. Just as he had finished, the light gave a few convulsive flickers, a feeble sputter, and then subsided into darkness. The candle had burnt itself out. He sat in a cramped and uneasy

attitude till he was stiff with cold, waiting for the tardy dawn, when at length he saw sundry grey patches in the pervading blackness, the faint daylight shining through the light and air holes in the side of the barn. Slowly the light increased and diffused itself till a man might have comfortably seen to read in the barn, and then Roach knew that it was broad daylight outside.

Temple's sleep had become restless and troubled, and the sharp pain in his limbs wove itself into vivid dreams, from which he awoke with a start to find himself in the strong grip of pain everywhere, head and body alike racked and tormented.

'I must get home some way,' he said, not knowing whether his feet would carry him.

Roach was by his side in an instant. 'I'll help you, sir; you lean on me all your weight.'

'I can't stir just yet. Open the doors and

see what the morning is like after the longest night in my life.'

Roach flung the door open, and the damp, raw air made Laurence shiver.

'It's not raining now, sir, but the sky's full of it, and there's a white mist over everything.'

'Now come and haul me up if you can, Roach, if I leave it any longer I shall be stuck fast here,' and Roach raised his master in his strong arms, and, with much difficulty, and hurting him cruelly, helped him on his feet, and supported him as he tried to put one stiff foot before the other. How they managed the short walk to the house, Roach could never tell. By sheer force of will Laurence compelled his limbs to bear him; the perspiration streamed down his face with the anguish of the effort, and when he entered the house he sank into a chair and fainted with pain.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

Bessie came down to breakfast that morning in excellent spirits, after a long night of sound and refreshing sleep. She was singing lightly to herself as she opened the sitting-room door, but when she caught sight of her husband, ghastly pale, and leaning back in a chair supported by Lemuel Roach, her song died away, the colour fled from her face, and she looked a very picture of fear and surprise.

'Oh, what's the matter, that you've come home so early, looking like that?' and Bessie turned appealing eyes towards one and another as she spoke.

Hester answered her. 'The master's very bad; he's got the rheumatiz all over him.

Father says he don't know hardly how he got him up 'ere from the barn, but he fainted away clean as soon as he come to sit on a chair.'

'Got him up from the barn! Good gracious, Hester, what do you mean?'

'I have spent the night in the barn,' said Laurence, opening his eyes, and motioning to Roach that he no longer needed his support. 'Bring the table nearer so that I can lean forward upon it, and then you and Hester can leave us.'

When Roach and his daughter had left the room, and they were alone, Laurence looked at his wife with an expression too subtle for her to interpret. Grief, anger, love, disappointment, might all be read in his gaze, but the look of physical suffering alone was what Bessie could understand, and she said, as she seated herself at the breakfast-table, 'What ever have you been doing, to make yourself so bad?'

'I have been wet through very often lately, and I have taken a profound chill.'

'All the more reason, then, Mr. Temple, why you shouldn't go spending the nights in the barn, like any tramp, when you'd a good home of your own to sleep in;' and Bessie shot a reproachful glance at her husband as she buttered her toast.

Laurence's grey eyes dilated and darkened as he looked at her, and his pale face grew still paler. 'It is true that I had a home to come to last night, but not a good home,' he said slowly. 'Wet, and ill, and weary, I was returning to you, when, as I was about to enter the house, I saw that I was neither expected nor wished for at home,' and Bessie's eyes fell beneath his, and she sat in uncomfortable silence, waiting for what he would say next. 'I am ashamed to tell you what I saw last night. If my own eyes had not seen it, I would never have believed it on the report of another; no one should have told me such a

thing about my wife with impunity. But last night, when I stood in the dark, almost as near to you as I am now, and you and Job Tolley were together in the porch, lighted from the open front door, I saw you bid each other good-night as only lovers do. He stood with his arm round your waist, and you let him, you let that man kiss you!' and Laurence's face was grievous to see in its pallor and emotion.

Bessie gave a short laugh that jarred him through every fibre. 'I never heard such a fuss about nothing! So that was why you went catching rheumatism in the barn, was it?'

'Is it nothing that my wife should allow that fellow to kiss her?' said Laurence hotly.

'I hope you don't think that I care for Job Tolley more than for anyone else?' said Bessie, in her turn speaking rapidly, and flushing to the roots of her fair hair.

Laurence looked at her for a moment in mute amazement before he replied, 'If you do

not care for Job Tolley more than for anyone else, then all I can say, after what I saw last night, is that you ought to care for him—there should be at least that excuse for you.'

'Hark at you!' said Bessie scornfully. 'Did ever anyone hear the like? First you're angry with me because you think I'm fond of Job Tolley, and when I tell you he's no more to me than anyone else, then you fire up and say he ought to be! That's a pretty thing for a husband to tell his wife, that she ought to be fond of another man! Of all the silly folks, I think you men are the silliest; you say one thing one minute, and then you contradict it, and yet you're always to be in the right, and the women are to be in the wrong. I tell you, Job Tolley's the same to me as anyone else, only I've known him longer, and if you were cross with his ways, you ought to have been pleased when you saw me box his ears—which I did, I certainly did!'

Laurence was resting his burning head on

his trembling hands, he had ceased to look at Bessie. He felt as though the light of life was fading from him, while his young wife laid bare before him the poverty, coarseness, and shallowness of her nature. He put the greatest restraint upon himself to enable him to reply calmly:

'I have never meant to be hard on you, and if I thought that I had unwittingly come between you and a man that you had loved before you knew me, even though that man were Job Tolley, I should have made every allowance for you. But you assure me that he is nothing to you. What then am I to think of you when you allow him to kiss and to embrace you?' and a surge of colour overspread his pale face as he spoke.

'You may think what you like, so long as I am free to do as I please,' replied Bessie with rude nonchalance; and she refilled her coffee-cup with a steady hand.

Laurence took no notice of her remark, but

said, while he was still able to collect and express his thoughts: 'You and I cannot go on together as we have been doing lately. As soon as I am well again, and can think it all out clearly, we must find some way of managing differently. I cannot continue to live with you. You torture me, you thwart me, you mock me. You oppose your ignorant obstinacy to my reasoned conviction; you treat me with contempt; you have starved my love for you slowly and deliberately till it is dead, and I am the poorest man alive—loveless, joyless, and disillusioned. You can never know how I have loved you, you can never know what you have thrown away. I shall not pour out my heart to you again, your heart is too small to hold even the overflow of mine. I have taught myself not to look to you for sympathy or understanding. You will not suffer me to help you, to guide you, to teach you. You have made the beautiful life I pictured, living with you, a miserable mockery.

You starve my heart, you degrade my intellect, you stifle my imagination; we have not a thought or an inspiration in common, and if I make you as wretched as you make me, my poor Bessie, God knows that I pity you from my soul!' and Laurence broke into deep sobs as he sank forward heavily on the table, and covered his face with his hands.

Bessie was terrified. She had only partially understood his bitter words, but she felt injured and wronged, and in her heart of hearts not wholly displeased that her husband was so angry about Job Tolley. She laid her hand on his shoulder, 'I'm afraid you're very ill, you wouldn't talk so if you weren't; you'd be better in bed than sitting up trembling like that;' and calling for Hester, she told her to fetch her father to help his master upstairs to bed.

If Bessie's heart did not tell her that her husband was very ill her common sense did, and she lost no time in sending for the doctor,

who pronounced the case to be one of acute rheumatic fever; and, as it was likely to be a long illness, he found a nurse for his patient in the course of the day.

When the doctor was gone, Laurence asked for paper and pencil. 'I must scribble a line to Borradale before my fingers are quite helpless, and you can direct it for me;' and with the utmost difficulty he wrote a few urgent lines to his friend, telling him that he was very ill, and begging him, if he could, to come to him at once. The day dragged on its slow length in pain and weariness, and night found Laurence in high delirium. His brain was in a whirl of racking pain and confusion of thought, in which the events of the last few days passed before him in chaotic retrospect and wild mingling of persons and places. For him time had ceased to be, and he knew no difference between day and night, or any distinction between sober reality and the wildest imagination of his troubled brain. He mut-

tered to himself ceaselessly, and a terrible necessity was laid upon him of perpetually discoursing with ghostly strangers who thronged the chambers of his brain, begotten by his own imagination, and yet tyrannously insisting upon being treated by him as distinct entities, each demanding a separate recognition.

Bessie was afraid of her husband when he no longer knew her, and his lack-lustre eye rested upon her without recognition. She would rather have seen him as he had been that morning at the breakfast-table, though it was exceedingly disagreeable, than encounter that terrible blank stare. The nurse assured her that he would not continue to wander in his mind for long, and that he might know her again at any minute; but Bessie was not to be reassured, and under the pretext that it might excite Laurence to see her, for he was very queer and irritable, she added, she went downstairs, and told the nurse to call her if she was wanted. Bessie sat down alone to her tea, and

no anxiety or perturbation of mind prevented her from making a very hearty meal. She wished indeed that Job Tolley was with her, as he had been at that time the day before, but even that wish was not strong enough to disturb her tranquillity. When she had finished her tea she rose and looked out of the window, and noticed that, though the sky was like a leaden lid overhead, no rain had fallen since early morning. Bessie did not go upstairs to see how her husband was, but after Hester had taken away the tea-things she sat down by the window to sew, occasionally sighing impatiently, and then singing to herself as she stitched. Suddenly a shadow fell across her work, and looking up she saw Job Tolley standing outside the window, frowning with sullen resentment, his pale face very much bruised, and his arm in a sling.

Bessie laid her forefinger on her lips in token of silence ; she rose swiftly, opened the front door noiselessly, and beckoned to Job

Tolley to come into the porch. 'Hush!' she said in a whisper, 'not a word above a breath. I've got Mr. Temple very ill in bed upstairs. He's been crazy like over you and me last night, and I don't know what'll happen if he should hear us now,' and Bessie's handsome face was pale with fear.

'That's a pretty tale to tell,' said Tolley, taking care to whisper very low. 'Mr. Temple ill in bed indeed! That's only his deepness to try and make you sorry for him, and to hide hisself safe away till he knows I'm gone out of the neighbourhood. Why, last night, when he caught me atop of the meadow, he was as strong and hearty as a bull. He used me shameful, left me for dead on the ground, and nigh broke my arm—an honest tradesman's arm, mind you—and gave me these bruises on my face and a cut on the back of my head. The man's got a reach like Heenan. Him ill indeed! That's a good 'un! If anyone has a call to be ill to-day, it's me that's had

savages to deal with;' and Job Tolley's indignation was so great that his voice rose above a whisper, when Bessie put her hand over his mouth.

'Be quiet, Job! I can't say how Mr. Temple may ha' been last night, but he's been ill enough and cross enough to-day, and now he's moithering in his talk all the time, and don't know me. You can ask Lemuel Roach if it isn't true. You should have gone home last night, Job.'

'How you talk! I should like to know how a man's to go home when he's left for dead on the ground, and no one to help him up, and dress his wounds, nor nothing? When I come to myself a bit I got a bed in a cottage at Hilbury, and I thought it no more than right to come and show you how that wild tiger of a husband of yours has mauled me, all along of you, and your sending for me. I'm not the only man that's to be pitied, I'm sure.'

Bessie had never liked her husband so well as when she saw her lover bearing visible tokens of his manly wrath. 'If you slept in a cottage you were better off than Mr. Temple, then, for he spent the night in the barn.'

'My goodness! what an escape I've had! No doubt he went there to wait for the daylight, so as he could see to finish his black job with me. It was a mercy I come to myself, and was able to crawl away! Who'd think that a little, quiet-spoken man like him was such a murdering villain? But I'll have the law of him!' and Tolley shook his fist vehemently.

'If I was a big fellow like you,' whispered Bessie, 'I should be ashamed to be beat by a little man like him, leastways I'd never own to it; and, Job, you'll be well long before Mr. Temple, for he's got the rheumatic fever, and 'll very like be ill a long time. Father was down with it for ten weeks once.'

'Aye, and it's a thing folks dies of sometimes, and there's widows left.'

'O Job! I wasn't thinking of nothing of that,' whispered Bessie eagerly, the colour mounting to her face. 'I mean that he's very bad, and you oughtn't to make such a fuss over a few bruises. If you'd courted me when I was a girl, you'd ha' run no danger of bruises then.'

'But, Bessie,' whispered Job Tolley, assuming his most truculent air, and bringing his lips very close to her ear, 'a man like me enjoys courtship that's flavoured with the danger of bloodshed.'

'Let's hear no more about it,' said Bessie, laughing softly. 'I want you to post me a letter on the way to the train, and the sooner you're off the better for you and me,' and she gave him her husband's note to Borradale.

'Is it from you?' Job asked, as he saw Bessie's writing on the envelope.

'No, it's from Mr. Temple, but I directed it because he was too bad to. Come, be off!

the nurse is calling me, you'll get me into trouble.'

'Is that all you've got to say to a man that's hurt and most likely lamed for life, all along of you, Bessie?' whispered Tolley, holding her hand in his.

'Mrs. Temple, you are wanted,' said a voice from within.

'Oh, go away, Job! I wish you'd never come here,' and she tore away her hand and shut the door quickly and quietly in his face.

Job Tolley stood for a minute in the porch, expecting that Bessie would relent and open the door, and then turned sullenly away with the letter in his hand. His displeasure increased as he walked towards the station.

'Upon my word, it's a hard service is a woman's! I'm to come when I'm called, and to go away when I'm told to, like a dog! Her husband is to be free to commit assault and battery on my person, and when I'm only enough recovered to crawl along the road I

am to take his letters to the post, am I? No, hang it all, I draw the line there. If she'd spoken soft to me, or kissed me, there's no saying what I'd ha' done for her, for she can twist a man like a skein o' silk about her pretty fingers. But to go to her, a poor wreck, that would ha' broke my own mother's heart only to ha' seen me, leave alone hearing how I came by my wounds—to go to her just to be sent to do her husband's errands; it's enough to make a worm's blood boil. No, nor I shan't do it neither,' and he tore the letter into fragments, and scattered them to the wind.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

DE PROFUNDIS.

A WEARY week passed at Pine Hill in the monotonous nursing of a patient whose condition did not vary perceptibly in the twenty-four hours. The doctor called daily in the morning, and again in the evening, and reported that the illness was running its normal course. Bessie spent as little time as possible in her husband's sick-room, merely taking her turn with Hester to sit with the patient while the nurse rested or had her meals. She had seen so little of illness or physical suffering in her healthy young life that to her selfish and unsympathetic nature the sight of pain, instead of creating a desire to alleviate it, only made her impatient to

avoid seeing what she found so disagreeable. What business had young men to be ill? and this particular troublesome illness, no doubt, was caused by her husband's own folly, and she hoped it might prove a warning to him. When the nurse looked grave, and told her how often such an illness runs a smooth course to a certain point, from which all goes wrong and the patient sinks, Bessie was not made anxious, and in reply uttered the unfounded assertion that young men never die.

Laurence was too ill to know or to care whether he was likely to recover or not. The bulk of the time he spent in the weird realm that is only entered with a passport of deadly illness, the shadowy land where ghosts are more real and substantial to a man than the familiar faces he has loved all his life. When his intellect grew clear for a while, and he remembered who he was and where he was, Laurence had but one remark to make,

but one question to ask, 'When will Borradale come?'

It could not occur to Bessie to suppose that Job Tolley had not posted the letter she had entrusted to him, but, as day after day went by and brought no reply, she began to doubt whether she had addressed it correctly. Her husband's distress when he awoke from a dream that his friend was sitting by his bedside to find that there was not even a letter from him was so pathetic that Bessie, urged to it by the nurse, took the kindly and practical step of telegraphing to Borradale. In a couple of hours a reply came to say that he would be with them that evening. Bessie took the telegram into her husband's room to tell him the good news, but he was again wandering in his mind, and excitedly bade her tell Lemuel Roach to put the money back again into the cash-box.

'Tell him I will give it him, but he must not steal it; however deep he buries it, it

cannot be hidden. I saw the gold lying in heaps in the churchyard. Job Tolley is a thief, too, but he steals things more precious than gold. Oh, betrayed, betrayed! Wife and servant both false to me—wife and servant,' and Laurence groaned and feebly moved his head. Bessie stood by the bedside with the open telegram in her hand, and her face flushed crimson as she listened to her husband's incoherent mutterings.

'Why doesn't the doctor give him something to keep him from talking when he's like that?' she asked the nurse, frowning with displeasure.

'Oh, you can't keep him quiet all the time, and you may be thankful he only chatters, instead of screaming and shouting.'

'Well, I think that 'ud be better than lying there taking folks' characters away like that. He never talks that way when he's got his senses about him.'

'Of course not,' said the nurse adroitly,

though, from the sameness of his illusions and the persistent iteration of certain ideas, she imagined that her patient's ravings had more meaning in them than she thought it prudent to admit; 'you're not used to folks being delirious. It takes 'em by contraries mostly. I've nursed parsons that, when the fever run high, would curse and swear till you was frightened to stay with 'em; and poor rough colliers as 'ud pray when they was delirious fit to melt the Almighty's heart to hear 'em.'

'Well, I shall go downstairs, nurse, for I don't choose to stand here and be spoke to like that, even if it is by a man that's moithered in his senses,' and Bessie stepped softly out of the room.

Late in the evening Borradale arrived, and was deeply distressed to learn from Bessie of his friend's condition.

'Why did you not send for me sooner?' he asked.

'We did write to you the day he went

to bed, and we've expected you every day since.'

'Are you sure that the letter was posted?' Borradale asked eagerly. 'It is almost impossible that it can have been lost on its way to me.'

'Oh, yes, it was posted right enough.'

'Was your messenger trustworthy?'

'I'm quite sure he was,' said Bessie, blushing; 'but hadn't you better go upstairs and see Mr. Temple? And you won't mind anything he says, will you, Mr. Borradale? for when he gets raving he's not very choice in his language, and he calls us thieves and I don't know what. You might think, to listen to him, that his home was a den of robbers;' and Bessie took Borradale to the door of the bedroom, but did not enter with him.

Borradale stepped softly into the room, as he did so motioning to the nurse not to move. Laurence lay apparently in a troubled

sleep. His thick hair was matted on his pale moist brow, the shaded light threw deep shadows on his face, and his lips were moving as though in silent prayer. His once strong hands lay helpless and swathed in cotton wool, and the nurse wiped the moisture from his brow as he moaned in his sleep. Could that poor suffering creature whom he did not recognise, that weak and worn figure in the bed, be his dear Laurence Temple? It seemed impossible; and as the truth forced itself upon him tears blinded Borradale, for the thought rushed into his mind that he was perhaps there to bid his friend good-bye, to wish him God-speed on the last long journey.

As he stood with folded arms by the bedside, watching every shadow of change that flitted over the face like, and yet so fearfully unlike, his dear Laurence, he took in every detail of the simple room. The bed stood with its side at a little distance from a long low window with chintz curtains closely

drawn; between the bed and the window was a small table, on which stood the lamp, and the nurse sat by it in a large armchair. On the wall, directly opposite the foot of the bed, hung a crucifix, and when Laurence opened his weary eyes they rested on the anguished face and bowed head of the Crucified, and as he gazed on the image of divine love and sorrow he lost the awful sense of loneliness in his pain. In a way of which he could not have dreamed in his health and strength he was sustained by a divine fellowship in suffering.

Borradale seated himself by the bed, asking the nurse to leave him to sit up alone with her patient, and as she had watched for several nights in succession she thankfully accepted his offer.

'You see, sir, Mrs. Temple is no manner of help to me. She's the strongest woman in the house, but she's downright glad to keep out of the room as much as she can. She's

gone to bed already, without even looking in to see how that poor thing there is beginning the night; and he keeps on talk, talk all the time, and it's easy to see what he's worritin' himself about,' said the nurse significantly.

'Oh, a man's delirium never has anything to do with what he thinks about when he's well,' said Borradale.

'No, sir, of course not; and that's what I tell Mrs. Temple when he says things about her that she can't abear to hear;' and having made the room comfortable, and put some coal on the fire as silently and stealthily as a burglar, the nurse gratefully retired to her bed.

Left alone in the sick-room Borradale sat for an hour or more by his friend's side, listening to his ceaseless muttering. He dared not speak to him, and he waited patiently, hoping to hear his own name spoken, for the nurse had told him that Mr. Temple had called for him many times in the

day. As Borradale bent over him to give him food or medicine Laurence's eyes met his without a ray of recognition, and he was beginning to despair of any sign of soul in the suffering body, when a sudden smile overspread his face, as love and intelligence kindled in his eyes, and he said, 'Borradale! dear Borradale, I knew you would come!'

'I should have come sooner, dear old fellow, but your letter never reached me; so your wife telegraphed for me, and I came at once. I am going to stay and nurse you, and we shall soon have you well again.' This was one of the pious lies that the healthy tell to the sick.

'It may be so, Borradale, but I hardly think it, for this illness struck me when I was down already, and my powers of resistance low. But now you are with me I have something to get better for. Thank God I have a friend!' and the tears started to his eyes.

'You're not strong enough yet to talk, old

fellow; you keep quiet and let me talk to you instead.'

'Let me speak while I can, my mind wanders so much. I have been a great fool, Borradale. My marriage—you know how much I expected from it—has brought me nothing but misery. I did not know how soon love can be killed. My wife is tired of me; I weary her, I vex her, I am altogether in her way. Borradale, I have tried to be patient with her, but sometimes she drives me to fury. Only the night before I was taken ill I returned from a journey unexpectedly, and I found her with her lover, and I could not enter the house after that and lie down by her side. I spent the night in the barn, wet through with the rain, and wrung with pain of mind and body. I had loved her so, trusted her so! Borradale, I knew I had failed to win her love, but I believed her pure as untrodden snow. I revered her very coldness. I thought God had put the heart of an angel

in the breast of a fair woman, that she was altogether too good and pure for me,' and Laurence grew excited and confused, and wandered in thought and speech, while his friend tried to soothe and quiet him.

After the joy and excitement of seeing Borradale came a strong reaction, and the two following days saw a change for the worse in Laurence's condition. Borradale could not communicate with the Stapletons, for they were on their way to Egypt, and he dreaded lest Laurence should express a wish to see them once more. But though he talked of them incessantly he never asked for them, for in the exalted state of his imagination he had only to think of his friends and they seemed at once to be near him.

Borradale tried gently to prepare Bessie's mind for the probability of her husband's death, and asked her if she would like her parents to come to her. She said she would rather send for her father than her mother,

but that if she was to be with her mother she would prefer going to her at Shelton.

'What, you would go away while your husband yet lives, and might ask for you at any moment?' asked Borradale, winking his dark eyes rapidly.

'He won't ask for me,' said Bessie, shaking her head. 'It's been nothing but scold, scold every time I've been into the room since he's been ill. Mr. Borradale, I've had a great deal to put up with,' and Bessie's handsome eyes softened with a film of tears, and she looked as sweet an image of sorrow and as easily to be consoled as a man could wish to see.

'Be sure that, if you have such a feeling,' said Borradale gravely, 'it is not all on one side—your husband must feel it too. I think that if you would go into his room when his mind is clear, and speak kindly to him, it would do him good.'

'I'm sure, Mr. Borradale, that my kindness

has been untold ; but, if he is really going to die,' and here Bessie rubbed one eye with the corner of her handkerchief, 'if he is really going to die, perhaps it's my duty to go home to mother now. I've never seen death, nor nothing of the sort, and a churchyard always frightens me after dark, and I'm no use here, no use at all, with a strange woman keeping me out of my own place in my husband's room. I'd better go home.'

Borradale looked at her with contempt, and would have enjoyed sweeping her out of the way as so much obstructive matter.

'Of course, you can do as you please, and leave your dying husband if it is pleasant to you to do so ; but I shall stay with my friend. Thank God, there is some one left to him who cares for him with a love passing the love of woman!' and he turned abruptly from her and left the room.

Bessie was very wretched. She had never felt so miserable in her short life. She was

nervous and frightened, and she thought, if illness in the house was so painful and unpleasant, what would death be, and a funeral? She shuddered with unreasonable terror that, being unsubdued by love, possessed her whole shallow nature. She started at every sound; each step on the stairs she thought was some one coming to tell her that her husband was dead; that death was in the house, in her familiar room, in her very bed. She called for Hester Roach to help her to pack a few things for her journey.

'O mum! you're never leaving, for sure, when the master's a-dying?' said the girl, in round-eyed astonishment.

'We can't know that he's dying,' said her mistress sharply. 'It's wicked to talk like that, Hester, when the Almighty is the only one of us that knows. Stop crying this minute, and give me my blue bonnet,' and Bessie stept to the room door and opened it in reply to a low tap.

It was Borradale, and he asked her sternly, 'Are you really going? The doctor has just seen your husband, and he thinks you may not have to wait so very long before you can decently leave the house.'

'Not have to wait long, Mr. Borradale? Oh, what do you mean?' and Bessie's lips were white and trembling.

'I mean that we fear your husband has but a short time to live.'

'Then I must go now, I must go now,' said Bessie, scarcely knowing what she was saying in the extremity of her animal fear of death. 'I daren't be where there's death; I daren't, indeed, Mr. Borradale!'

There is no arguing with unreasoning fear; and love—the only force that can control it—not existing, terror had it all its own way, and hurried Bessie out of the house, in the face of all decency, to catch the next train for Shelton.

Lemuel Roach went with her to the

station to carry her small portmanteau, and she shed some emotional tears of mere agitation as she walked by his side. Roach was not more faithful to his master than Bessie to her husband, but he held strong opinions on the subject of woman's duty, and he judged Mrs. Temple very severely for running away from her dying husband.

Laurence did not know that his wife had left the house, and he never asked for her, though he frequently mentioned her name. She had been in his room so seldom that he did not miss her presence. He spoke much of his friends, but of Helen Wentworth most frequently of all.

The night after Bessie's departure Laurence lay quiet and free from pain, his mind clear and tranquil, but he was too weak to talk. His short life of twenty-seven years passed in lightning-swift retrospect before him, its summers contracted to a gleaming day, its winters to a brief storm that, for him,

had spent its fury. Distant as the unrecorded ages of eternity seemed to him his first conscious being, when his soul, fresh from the hand of God, was love, pure love. His childhood, youth, and manhood lay spread before his mental vision like a book whose meaning had been hard to understand, and whose leaves were blistered with the learner's tears; but its pages had now become luminous and intelligible. Through the brief story of his life, with its sins, errors, and imperfections, the love of God had encompassed him on every side and drawn his heart towards his brother man. Love had been his guiding principle, and, though this world's judgment would pronounce his life a failure, yet Laurence had never lowered his standard, or lost sight of his ideal. He had no feeling that his days on this earth had been few, for they had sufficed to hold much happiness and much suffering, and he could not remember the

beginning of his short life—to himself he had always existed.

Borradale sat by the bedside, closely watching his friend, and his practised eye noted several little indications that he was not so ill as he had been at that hour on the previous night. If the slight change he detected in him did not amount to positive improvement, at all events he certainly had not taken another downward step in the last four-and-twenty hours.

Presently Laurence broke the silence by asking what day of the week it was, and this mundane question, from one who seemed so nearly to have entered upon eternity, delighted Borradale as a recognition that his dear friend was still among mortals, and computed time as we do.

'Does time pass slowly with you, old fellow?'

'I have lost count of it altogether, Borradale; do open the window, I want to feel

the cold, fresh air,' and Laurence turned his heavy eyes towards the window.

Borradale was doubtful for a moment what he ought to do; then, throwing another blanket over the bed, he drew aside the window curtains and opened the casement wide.

'You know I can refuse you nothing,' he said affectionately; 'so you are beginning to take liberties. You shall only have the window open for a few minutes, and I will fill up the lower part of it by looking out of it, to keep a direct current of air from blowing on you,' and Borradale rested his elbows on the window sill, and put his head and shoulders out into the chill, keen air.

What a glorious emancipation from the narrow bounds of a sick-room, to lift his eyes towards infinite space, to the clear sky, thick-set with glittering stars! The crescent moon was sinking on the horizon, and across the dark vault of heaven stretched the Milky Way, with its myriad worlds of light. The

passionless stars looked coldly down on the upturned face with its appealing, troubled gaze, and a sense of lonely impotence fell upon Borradale, and he clung to his friend's life with an intensity of love.

'O God, let him live, only let him live!' He had not known how dear Laurence was to him till he was so nearly gone from him, and every faculty of his soul was concentrated in the one desire that he might be spared to him.

Suddenly he started at the sound of Laurence's voice, fuller and stronger than when he last spoke. He had fallen into a light doze, and was talking to himself, and as Borradale closed the window and turned towards him he opened his eyes, and cried, 'Helen! Helen!' and seemed bewildered and uncertain where he was.

'You are dreaming too vividly, my dear fellow, in spite of the fresh air,' said Borradale, wiping his moist brow.

Laurence smiled faintly. 'It was the cool air that made me dream. I thought I was in the oak woods at Coombe Delaway, gathering primroses with Helen. It was such a happy dream; if I dreamed it again I think I should soon get well.'

While the friends thus spoke to each other, far away on the dark waters of the Mediterranean a ship was cleaving her way eastward through the furrows of the sea. The vessel, a speck on the wide bosom of the ocean, pursued her path across the shimmering tract of moonlight, cast in a thousand broken reflections on the gently moving surface of the water. The stars shone with a lustre impossible in our murky atmosphere. They were like lamps hung from the vault of heaven, and one saw the blue depths of space above them. It was a very still night, and Helen Wentworth slept as peacefully in her berth as though she had been in her bed at Poges Court. The cabin was dimly lighted,

the soft night air entered at the open port, and no sound was heard but the steady vibration of the screw, and the lapping of the water against the ship, which every moment bore the sleeper further from him of whom she was dreaming. For in the mysterious domain of dreams Helen was walking hand-in-hand with Laurence through the oak woods at Coombe Delaway. Never had she dreamt so vividly. Every sense was awake and active in her deep sleep. She felt the warm touch of Laurence's hand, she felt the leafy carpet underfoot; she heard the rustle of the brown leaves as she trod upon them, and she smelt the faint perfume of the primroses that starred the ground. Oh, to wander thus for ever through dreamland, two happy, irresponsible shades, with none to come between them, and wronging no one by their love! But the illusion was as brief as it was perfect, and the happy sleeper was wakened by the very brightness of the vision that de-

lighted her. Helen scorned herself that a dream should so move her, and she dried her fast-falling tears with anger, and not with self-pity. 'I would lie awake all night rather than dream that dream again!'

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BESSIE IS LOST.

When Bessie ran away from her husband's death-bed in a paroxysm of selfish terror she so far retained the use of her faculties as to make very efficient arrangements for her own comfort. She took a first-class ticket for Shelton, bought herself a book at the newly erected bookstall, and telegraphed to Job Tolley to meet her at her journey's end. Bessie knew that if she wished to be met she ought to have asked her father to meet her; but she also knew that he would be angry with her for leaving her husband in his extremity, and that would be unpleasant, and she had never knowingly faced anything dis-

agreeable in her life, and she was not going to do so now. If Job met her there would at least be some one glad to see her, and who would approve of what she had done, and her parents need not know that she had seen him. Her mother would understand that she had been too frightened to stay with her husband, and, though her father was sure to be angry—well, he had often been angry with her before, and would be so again, and she must just make the best of it.

All this, and more of the same sorry kind, poor Bessie had ample time to reflect upon as she sat turning over the pages of her book, and vaguely looking out of the window of the railway carriage at the trees and hedgerows, apparently chasing one another along by the side of the line. She was too much concentrated in self to take any interest in the adventures of an imaginary heroine, so that she did not even make an effort to read her novel. But she had seen ladies travelling

with yellow-backed books, so that she regarded a novel, a foot-warmer, and a rug as equally necessary equipments for a journey. As her inconsequent thoughts hurried through her mind the oddest pictures projected themselves from the magic lantern of her brain. Perhaps her husband was already dead. She would not think of the funeral; she never could bear funerals; Mr. Borradale must see to that. But, instead, Bessie beheld a vision of a golden-haired widow in the extremity of fashionable mourning, with a crape veil down to the ground, a very cataract and torrent of grief in effigy, but resembling a bridal costume dipped in ink rather than the livery of sorrow and bereavement. Then the bright vision faded as the alternative presented itself to her mind that Laurence might yet recover, and again there appeared to her the golden-haired woman, no longer clad in that becoming costume, and her handsome face no longer charming with its air of sweet

resignation, but wearing instead a sullen and discontented expression.

Whatever picture rose in Bessie's imagination, she was always the principal figure in it—a certain golden-haired woman was the centre of her little world. She had done a reckless thing in asking Job Tolley to meet her at Shelton ; but she was living wholly in the present, she had cut herself adrift from the past, and had neither the intellect nor the conscience to see plainly the direction in which her actions tended. Several persons recognised her on the platform, and saw the greeting that passed between her and Tolley. 'O Job, Job! I've come away home for a bit ; I've been so frightened,' she said as she clasped his big hands with both of hers.

'Who's been frightening of you, I should like to know?'

'Oh, no one—at least no one on purpose! Mr. Temple's dying, and I've come away to father and mother. I daren't be where there's

death; indeed, I daren't!' and Bessie looked as if she had seen a ghost.

'It's been a'most too much for you, my pretty one,' said Tolley, drawing her hand through his arm. 'So Mr. Temple's dying, is he?'

'Yes, he's so near it that I may get a telegram any hour to say it's all over.'

Job Tolley breathed hard, and pressed her hand. 'And if you was to hear he was dead, Bessie, what then?'

Bessie knew perfectly well what he meant, but she made no reply.

'If he was dead, what should you do, Bessie?'

'Do? Why, I should be a widow, to be sure.'

'Not long you wouldn't be, Bessie; not long. Promise me that,' and, unrebuked, he kissed her cheek as he sat by her in the fly.

'I don't like such talk; I don't think it's right,' said Bessie coldly.

Job laughed at her. 'It's too late in the day for you to talk like that. Has it been right of you to whistle me away from a good situation, and make that fool of me that I dawdle about the places where I used to see you, and stay eating up my savings, and can't make up my mind to go clean away? It's all your doings, everything that's gone wrong with me has been your doings. If you'd let me be I should ha' been married respectable enough to 'Melia Harbottle, and in partnership with her father by now, but you never gave a man the chance to forget you. Talk of not being right indeed! You've done me wrong enough, without being taken so particular all of a sudden.'

'Now, Job, I didn't ask you to meet me on purpose to give me a scolding. You get out of this fly at the very next turn of the road, and don't let nobody know that you met me.'

'I'm to be hustled out of the way here as

well as at Pine Hill, am I?' and Job put his head out of the window to tell the driver to stop. 'Well, good-bye then. You're a wilful piece, you are! I shall look in to-morrow night to hear what news,' and he left Bessie to alight at her parents' door respectably and alone.

Bessie was right in anticipating that her father would be angry with her for leaving her dying husband, but she was not prepared for her mother's displeasure also.

'You was afraid of death!' said Mrs. Jarvis scornfully. 'Afraid of death! Afraid of a fiddlestick! It's a wife's place to stay by her husband, and you'd ought to ha' stayed by Mr. Temple to the end. Why didn't you send for me if you was afraid? Me that has seen many a dozen corpse, and hopes to see many another, and never was afraid of one of 'em! If it had been tadpoles or beetles that had scared you away there might ha' been something in it; but a fine, strapping young

woman like you to be afraid of a poor dead corpse, that don't know its right hand from its left, and that can't say bo! to a goose, I'm downright ashamed of you, I am!'

'Aye, aye,' chimed in her father, 'you've done wrong to come away, and him lying there. I doubt you'd better go back in the morning.'

'Why, father, if I was to hear to-morrow that he was dead I couldn't go back to the house while he was there, and if I hear he's better I should look silly to go home so soon.'

'You needn't be afraid of looking no sillier than what you do this minute,' said her mother sharply. 'There, stop crying, and have summat to eat, and father and me'll think what's best to be done with you, for it needs no signpost to point out as you missed your way when you left your husband's house, and him a dying man.'

'I never thought you'd turn on me like that, mother,' said Bessie, sobbing angrily.

'No, no, your mother's not turning on you, child; she's only speaking for your good,' said her father; 'and she's i' the right, for it's ondecent running away from sick and dying folk when they're your own husband; you could but ha' done it if it was somethin' catching.'

That night Bessie went early to bed in the little room that had been hers since she was a child, and after counting up her grievances, and satisfying herself that she was a very ill-used person, she said a perfunctory prayer while she untwisted her thick plaits, and lay down to enjoy the dreamless sleep of perfect health. Her first waking thought was that Job Tolley was coming to see her that very evening. Then she wondered whether she should receive a telegram before then with anything particular in it, for she did not care to define to herself the nature of the news she expected. But the day wore slowly away, and no message came, and her father

and mother both urged her to return to her home; but she listened to them in stolid silence: she had given them her reasons the night before for remaining where she was, and she was not going to repeat them. She was sullen and irritable, and little Jack kept well out of Aunt Bessie's way, having a lively remembrance of the stinging slaps her shapely hands could inflict. She did not help her mother with the housework as she used to do before she was married, and Mrs. Jarvis was too proud to ask her, but set about preparing dinner with an injured and reserved expression, while Bessie moved restlessly from place to place, now sitting down to sew for a few minutes, now throwing down her work, sighing and looking out of the window.

But when evening came, and the shutters were closed and the candles lighted, a feverish gaiety possessed her; she lifted the cat on her lap and tried to teach it to sit up and beg; she sang snatches of old songs she had

learned from her grandfather Wylie; and she swung little Jack across her knee and made belief to give him an amicable whipping. Terah Jarvis sat smoking his pipe on the opposite side of the hearth, watching his daughter attentively.

'What's come over her now?' he thought, when he heard steps in the porch, followed by a knock at the door, which Bessie heard as well as her father, for she stopped her hoydenish romp with little Jack, set the boy down, and rose with bright, excited eyes.

'You sit still, and I'll see who it is,' said Terah; but his wife was too quick for him, and she opened the door to Job Tolley before Terah had crossed the floor.

'Well, Mrs. Jarvis, I dare say you think it's a long time since I've been to see you,' he said, entering the kitchen with a swaggering air; 'and this 'll be to say good-bye, for I'm going to leave Shelton. Why, Mrs. Temple, you here again?' and he shook hands with

Bessie, who glowed like a rose. 'You're looking very solid to-night,' Job added with impudent familiarity as he glanced at the grave faces of Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis.

'Aye, and with good reason,' said Terah. 'Mr. Temple's illness makes me and my missus very anxious, it does.'

'You should take pattern by Mrs. Temple; she bears up wonderful,' and Job Tolley smiled at Bessie's radiant face.

'She's naterally glad to see her own folks again,' said her mother by way of explaining her daughter's too cheerful aspect; 'but she's going back to her home immediate; she'd no business coming away while things was so uncertain.'

'If I'd done something wrong I couldn't have been scolded more than I have for coming home to my own father and mother; but you'll take my part, won't you?' and Bessie looked at Job Tolley with appealing blue eyes.

'Mr. Tolley 'll pass his opinion on our private family affairs when he's asked to by me or your father, and not before, I hope!' said Mrs. Jarvis to her daughter with withering dignity. They had all remained standing; no one had offered Tolley a chair, and Mrs. Jarvis had given the finishing touch to the appearance of discomfort the group presented by leaving the door open, as a hint that she expected the visitor to make but a brief stay.

For a moment Job Tolley seemed embarrassed, and ran his red fingers through his heavily pomatumed red hair, and looked as ill at ease as Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis. Bessie was undisguisedly delighted to see him, but the displeasure on her parents' faces made her very uncomfortable.

'Well, I can't say that you've much of a welcome for an old friend to-night,' said Tolley suddenly.

Now was Terah Jarvis's opportunity to speak his mind. He had been master in his

own house since his daughter had left home, and so he intended to continue.

'It's in this way, Job Tolley,' he said impressively; 'it's in this way. You haven't cared to come and see me and my missus since Bessie was married and went away; it's only when she's here that you come a-nigh us, so we should be sand-blind if we didn't see who it was you come after. And what I say behind your back I say plain afore your face: as my daughter's a married wife, and so long as I'm her father with a roof over my head, no young married woman shall have visits from young men here, not if it was my own daughter ten times over; and if the cap fits you may wear it, Job Tolley.'

Bessie was astounded at her father's decision of manner. It was obvious that he had not been kept in his right place since she left home; he would not have dared to speak in this way in her time.

Tolley changed colour with anger. 'Well,

Mr. Jarvis, I can't say as you're complimentary to Mrs. Temple in your words. As far as I'm concerned, I understand you to mean that you only expect to see me when you and Mrs. Jarvis are alone; and, if that's it, you'll have to make yourselves a deal more agreeable than what you are to-night. This isn't your doing, Bessie, I know;' and he shook hands with her and left the house, slamming the door after him, and without bidding good-night to her parents.

Little Jack meanwhile had stood a silent listener to all that had passed, with ears, eyes, and mouth wide open. 'Grandmother, I'm glad he's gone, he can't box my ears now.'

'Box your ears, child! Whatever do you mean? There's no one but your grandfather and me 'ud dare do such a thing!'

'But he said he would yesterday, when he got out of Aunt Bessie's fly on the Shelton road. He said he'd box my ears if I told you as I'd seen him.'

But Aunt Bessie did not hear the conclusion of little Jack's *mal-à-propos* confession, for she had rushed upstairs in a whirlwind of anger and resentment, and bolted herself in her bedroom. A few more days passed at the cottage, in which the domestic atmosphere was highly charged with electricity. Things could not possibly remain as they were, and a crisis was fast approaching. Each day Bessie had a quarrel with her parents when they told her she ought to go home to her dying husband, and every evening she rewarded herself for what she was pleased to consider her patience by slipping out of doors in the dusk to meet Job at the turn of the road.

Bessie did not write to Borradale for tidings of her husband, and, as they did not come unasked, a week passed by in which she could not tell whether she was a wife or a widow. Job Tolley's first word was always to ask her what news she had had from Pine

Hill, and still she could not tell him if Laurence was alive or dead. But the wished-for telegram came at last. Bessie was hurrying along in the dusk to her appointed meeting-place with Job, stung by her parents' reproaches, and in a reckless and desperate mood, when she met the telegraph boy from Shelton, who recognised her, and stopped to give her an envelope directed to Mrs. Temple, Shelton Nursery Gardens.

Darkness was falling so rapidly that she could not see to read the message, but her boding heart told her what was in it, and she thrust it unopened in her pocket, while above and around her in the gathering darkness she read, as in letters of fire, 'Laurence is dead, Laurence is dead!' Her limbs trembled, her brain swam, only the strength of youth kept her from falling, and she leaned against a tree and stood for a few moments with closed eyes.

'This is never you, is it? Why, what's

the matter with you, Bessie?' said Job Tolley, who was walking slowly to and fro on the road, waiting for her, and now found her supporting herself against the tree. 'What ever's the matter with you, dear?' and Bessie flung herself into his arms with a hysterical sob.

'Oh, it's come, Job; it's come—the telegram's come!' and from sheer emotion, and not knowing what she was doing, the frightened girl clung to him and clasped him round the neck. Tolley trembled violently, but he said nothing. He put his arm round Bessie to support her, and led her from the spot, hurrying her along the road in the direction of Shelton. He walked so fast that she lost her breath, and begged him, speaking in gasps, not to go so fast.

'Give me the telegram that I may see for myself,' he said, suddenly standing still.

'But it's too dark to read,' objected Bessie.

'Give it me, I say,' and he stamped his foot, and a passionate gesture, that in her husband would only have caused her to smile contemptuously, from Job Tolley produced an immediate effect, and she handed him the telegram with trembling haste. He tore open the envelope and threw it away, and, taking a match-box from his pocket, struck a light, and, shielding it in the hollow of his hand from the wind, had just time to read the words, 'Your husband is recovering quickly,' when the tiny flame died out and left the affrighted lovers face to face in the dark. They could not see; they felt the dismay depicted on their pale faces. Bessie had been so sure, beyond all manner of doubt, that the telegram was to tell her of her husband's death, and that she was free to marry Job Tolley, that as she gradually took in the full meaning of Borradale's message the revulsion of feeling was more than she could bear. She covered her face with her hands and

shed some of the bitterest tears that had ever fallen from her eyes.

Job laughed coarsely. 'At all events, we needn't tell Shelton the news,' he said as he tore the paper into pieces and scattered it in the air. 'If anyone can find the bits and put them together again, they are welcome to read it. No, Bessie, your husband is in no hurry to die; he likes to make himself as inconvenient as he can. But, mind you, he's dead to you and me, the same as if he'd had a funeral and got a gravestone a-top of him. You hate him, and if he don't hate you he's a fool; but I can't waste my life waiting for dead men's shoes. You and him between you have led me the life of a dog, and I'll bear it no longer. I've got a good situation at Birmingham, to manage the business where I was head man before I come to Harbottle's. My old employer's dead, and I'm going to manage for the widow, Mrs. Stott. But I'm not going alone. You're mine, Bessie; mine

before ever Mr. Temple set eyes on you. If you'd cared for him, and meant to ha' been a true wife to him, would you have carried on wi' me as you have done since your wedding-day? I tell you a husband that's put up wi' your doings as he's done deserves all he gets; he's worked for it. My word, Bessie, if you'd been my wife, I'd ha' killed you for half what you've done! He doesn't know how to take care of a woman like you, and he's lost you through it, and serve him right!' and he put his arm firmly round her shoulder.

'You're mine now, Bessie, the same as if you was a widow. You've been the apple on the topmost bough, and I've shook the tree to bring it down, and I've waited patient for it to ripen, and now it's fairly fallen into my hand, and it's mine,' and he kissed her pale face on mouth and brow.

Bessie was nearing the rapids. For long she had drifted with the swift current towards a deep fall, and the roar of its waters filled

her ears. She had loosed her hold on truth and honour, and she felt glad that Job Tolley's coarse masculine will overruled her feeble scruples, for while she yielded herself as a passive tool her conscience, which never spoke loudly, was altogether silenced.

'But Mr. Temple is alive, and I am his wife,' Bessie urged gently, as a decent display of loyalty on her part.

Job laughed again. 'You should have thought of that earlier, my pretty one. You've been his wife these eighteen months past without it making you unkind to me, and you're not going to begin to-night. I'm master now; I'm not to be made a fool of any longer.'

Just then a large two-wheeled cart, driven by a farmer returning from market, passed close to them in the darkness.

'Hi! Mister!' cried Job, and the cart stopped. 'May I make so free as ask where you're driving to?'

'A goodish step—to Hackston, sixteen miles if it's an inch.'

Hackston was a little market town in the next county, and Bessie had never been there.

'Can you give me and my missis a lift there? We were going by rail, but we've lost the train. We'll pay for our seats if you'll take us.'

The man laughed good-naturedly. 'You don't take me for a hackney coachman, do you? And, besides, I don't know what's the fare to Hackston. But jump up with you, and make haste, for I've got a missis too, and she gives me a piece of her mind when I come home late,' and Job helped Bessie to get into the cart, and sprang in after her.

Though the night was dark, and the man was a stranger to her, she involuntarily drew down her veil over her burning face as she listened to the glib lies Job poured forth about himself and his 'missis.' The decisive downward step was taken, and Bessie was

conscious only of Job's strong will upholding and directing her, and she thought with admiration, 'How bold he is! how clever he is!'

And the cart rumbled along the dark lanes till midnight, duly accomplishing the sixteen miles to Hackston; but Bessie's soul on that fateful journey had traversed a whole universe. She had passed in memory through all the stages of her short life, from her earliest childhood to the present moment when she sat with Job Tolley's arm round her waist, beguiling an honest countryman into the idea that they were man and wife; and she bade good-bye, consciously, but not unwillingly, to such innocence and purity as she had cared to retain. All that weary night Terah Jarvis and his wife sat up in the kitchen, waiting for the return of the daughter who would never again enter the old home an innocent woman. When the dawn came they were shocked at each other's haggard faces; ten years had been added to them in

the agony of that night. But the next day, when the worst unspoken fear was confirmed, and they heard that Job Tolley was missing, and had been seen with their daughter the evening before, Terah said, 'I wish to God our Bessie lay dead afore us, for then we should know the worst,' and his wife answered through her tears, 'Aye, father, you may well wish that!'

CHAPTER XXXV.

LAURENCE KNOWS THE WORST.

It is three months since Laurence's youth and strength brought him through a deadly illness, and he looked back on the peril he had escaped, much as a man who has been shipwrecked looks on the hungry waves and sunken rocks from which he has been rescued. His faithful friend Borradale stayed with him till he was fully convalescent, and then he had been to Bournemouth to complete his recovery, and now in the early spring he was settled again to his work at Pine Hill. But he was alone. Borradale had told him as soon as he was strong enough to bear it of Bessie's flight when she thought that he was dying, and he was not so much astonished as intensely

grieved at her conduct. He knew better than anyone else how selfish and cold-hearted she was, and how she shrank from the thought and sight of pain, but now that he had recovered he was surprised as week after week passed by, and still there came no letter from his wife, nor any intimation as to when she intended to return to her home.

By the open display of her utter indifference to him personally, and of her contempt for the decent observances and humanities of life, Bessie had cut herself off from her husband completely. He could not trust her in time of need ; he could not look to her for help or companionship of any kind. She had taken herself away of her own accord, and she was free to come back when she chose, but Laurence would not ask her to return. If she could be happy to stay with her parents for an indefinite time she was welcome to do so, and for himself he was thankful for the present peace and quiet of his home. No

doubt his days were sad, but they were no longer degraded by coarse and stupid displays of temper, nor rendered bitter by the perpetual reminder of the huge mistake he had made in his marriage.

Borradale had yet another piece of news for his friend when he had reached that prosaic stage of convalescence in which the late invalid is thought to be well enough once more to take his share of the disagreeables of life, and this was the news of the disappearance of Lemuel Roach and his wife one night when Laurence was at the worst. But this was an event for which he was not unprepared, and, after the shock he had received at the beginning of his illness, nothing seemed to matter to him, and he only laughed when Borradale told him of his bailiff's flight.

'Oh, yes, I know all about that,' he said. 'The fellow has turned out a scamp; he has robbed me, and decamped with the plunder. My extremity has been his opportunity, and

from his point of view he has used it well; indeed, everyone seems to have been very busy while I was out of the way. But it's a good thing for me; I shall be my own bailiff now, and it will give me more to do, for I want nothing in this world but work, hard work, and plenty of it.'

And he had it. Everything on the estate had fallen into a wild state of sixes and sevens, and Roach's dishonesty had filtered down through every grade of labourer in the form of all kinds of petty peculations and mean deceits. But the more chaotic Laurence found affairs, the more it braced him to renewed efforts to put all in order again. He was out on his farm in the early morning before his labourers, and he made his last round after their day's work was done. He tried to occupy himself so that he should have no time for thought, and when night came, from sheer exhaustion, he slept as heavily as his own ploughmen.

But Laurence could not prevent his mind from going over the events of the last few months, though he would not suffer it to dwell upon them. With the softened heart and thankful spirit with which a man recovers from severe illness, with the capacity for love and for friendship keener and finer than it had ever been, Laurence found himself at twenty-seven years of age condemned to a life in which personal happiness could form no part. The vision of a beautiful home life for which he married had been rudely dispelled; his love had been thrown away as worthless, and all that was most holy to him desecrated by contact with a coarse and cold nature. If his young wife should relent and return to him, would it be possible, he asked himself, to patch up some kind of life together under one roof that would not be degradation to him? Laurence thought not, and yet if Bessie returned to him grieving for the pain she had caused him, and promising better

things, would not his love revive for her even now? He had everything in their little home kept in its accustomed order and place, ready for the day when Bessie should return from her long visit to her parents. Laurence could not understand why his wife had not written to him for money during her long absence, for she had taken very little with her, and he knew how unlikely her father would be to supply her with more. He sat down under a kindly influence to write her a cheque, but he laid his pen aside before he had dipped it in the ink. She knew she could have all she wanted merely by writing to ask her husband for it, and he thought after all she ought to be the first to open communication between them. Sometimes the remembrance of Job Tolley flashed through Laurence's mind, but he thrust the hateful thought aside. He neither knew, nor cared to know, whether the fellow was still at Shelton, or whether Bessie ever saw him or

not. He could not now be jealous of his wife in the ordinary meaning of the word, because he no longer loved her; yet for her own sake he shrank from the thought of any evil coming near her; but he had been powerless to restrain her, even when they lived together, and his love had made him alert and vigilant.

Sometimes after a hard day's work, when Laurence sat by his lonely fireside, he had a piteous vision of himself lying upstairs unconscious, and a tide of anger rushed through his mind at the thought of his wife forsaking him in his need. But when he felt enraged with Bessie, a voice within him always said: 'Why are you angry with your wife, when you know that you never missed her from your side? You never asked for her, you never wanted her. Another woman's image was in your heart, and her name on your lips, and the presence of another woman in your dreams was more precious to you than all the world beside. Where is there room for anger?'

And Laurence tried to hold the scales fairly between himself and his wife.

It was a wild morning late in March, and a keen north-east wind had bleached the colour out of earth and sky. The clouds were light grey as the wind shifted their thick layers, or dark grey as it piled them up in heavy masses. The earth and the naked trees were light brown where the pallid sunbeams fell upon them, and dark when the pall of clouds again veiled the sky. The cheerful thrush sang in the chill mornings in faith that spring was near at hand, and Laurence as a farmer rejoiced in the scarifying wind that dried the sodden earth after the winter floods. He no longer breakfasted in the barn with Minty and her kittens, but the cat and her young family were promoted to breakfast with their master in the house, and he set her a saucer full of milk on the hearth before he ate his porridge and opened his letters.

Laurence's first letter was from his sister at Luxor, and her vivid description of the glorious sunshine and eternal blue skies brought warmth and colour into the grey English landscape as he read. But there was no mention of Helen, and he threw the letter into the fire as soon as he was well within sight of 'Your affectionate sister' at the end. Then he read a cheery note from Borradale announcing his first brief with as much pride as though he were telling him of the birth of a son and heir. The third letter was directed in Mrs. Jarvis's extraordinary writing, which was more like the impress left on paper of the gallant struggles of a fly to save his life after a fall into the ink-pot than anything else with which it could be compared.

Laurence opened the envelope with wide-spread fingers, that expressed a shrinking aversion for the letter itself as well as for the writer. 'I suppose it is to tell me when

Bessie is coming home,' he said to himself. But the contents of the letter raised strong and terrible emotion, for Laurence turned ashy pale as he read, and his hands shook like an old man's. At length he laid the letter down, and his face was drawn with pain. 'My God! is it possible?' he groaned. The letter was a heart-broken composition from Mrs. Jarvis, stained and blistered with her tears. It was to tell Laurence that Bessie had left her parents and gone away with Job Tolley as long ago as early in last December; that they had not known where she was till a day or two since, when they had had a letter from her saying they were living at Birmingham, where Job had a good situation with the widow of his late employer. Mrs. Jarvis's language was involved, and not easy to understand, but through all there ran a tone of genuine distress and shame that redeemed it from vulgarity. She said she had not written sooner because they hoped

Bessie would have done so herself, and as the mischief was of a kind not to be mended they had let the weeks run by over their shame and sorrow, till at last she had written, driven to it by her husband threatening to go to Pine Hill himself if she didn't, and she daren't let him do that. Terah was so broken with trouble he wasn't fit to travel; she was afraid he would have a stroke.

This, then, was the meaning of Bessie's long absence, and, remembering the scene he had witnessed in the porch on the evening of his unexpected return home, Laurence believed his wife to be even guiltier than she was. He believed that the panic in which she had left him when he appeared to be dying was all a shallow pretence merely to enable her to quit the shelter of his roof to go to Job Tolley. Job Tolley! a name that he had laughed at for its absurd incongruity, and the bearer of it whom he felt to be vulgar to the verge of low comedy; both

the name and the man had now become tragic enough to him. Laurence was angry that he had not known earlier, and yet it would have served no good purpose if he had.

Could he have known the very evening that Bessie ran away from her father's house, she would have cut herself off from him as completely as she had done by the three months spent with Job Tolley! It would have been equally impossible then as now to receive her again as his wife. While he winced and shivered under the blow, Laurence realised how unbearable it would have been if it had fallen upon him before Bessie had gradually disenchanted him, and taught him by cruel experience how little she valued his love. Beneath all the tumult of anger, disgust, and pity that he felt, there was an unmistakable sense of relief that it was now settled for ever that his wife would never live with him again. But, though he was freed

from a bitter bondage, it was impossible to rejoice in the liberty that was obtained at the price of Bessie's degradation. There was a sombre satisfaction in reflecting that this terrible thing had not happened because he had not told his wife to come home again. No; she had gone away from Shelton while her husband was still ill in bed, and in little more than a week from her departure from Pine Hill. Had she counted so positively on his death that she imagined she was only forestalling her widowhood by a very short time, and that then she should be free to marry Job Tolley?

Laurence was glad that he was alone, that he had not even Borradale with him, while he strove to overcome his tumultuous feelings and to determine on some definite course of action. If Borradale were there he knew he would give him legal advice on the spot to get a divorce without loss of time. Laurence turned crimson at the thought.

'What! tell all the world how low my poor Bessie has sunk!' and the idea of such loathsome publicity was abhorrent to him. That was his first feeling, but on reflection it occurred to him that Bessie's opinion on the subject might be—nay, ought to be—a very different one from his. The only chance of future security for her must lie in the hope that her husband would divorce her, and that then Job Tolley would make her his wife. Without this her position was a terrible one—no man's wife, and depending merely on the fleeting passion of a coarse-minded man for the semblance of wifehood. It was agony to Laurence to think it all out, but he set himself to face his circumstances courageously, and to see if any good could be evolved from what seemed to be unmitigated evil.

At present but one thing was plain to him, and that was that any steps he took should be solely for what he conceived to be

Bessie's good, however painful it might be to himself. He felt that he was still in a measure responsible for her, though she had renounced both his love and his care. It might easily be that Job Tolley was better suited to her than he had ever been, and that she would be faithful to him, and that it might be his duty to enable her to become Job Tolley's wife, in order that some stable relationship might be reconstructed out of this shipwreck of faith and honour and breaking of sacred bonds. Laurence hated the whole train of thought inexpressibly, and, tearing Mrs. Jarvis's letter into fragments before he burnt it, he hurried into the open air. All that day he was like another man, and his labourers wondered what had come over the master. He was hard, exacting, and imperious. He found fault with severity, he had no word of encouragement for good work, and he suspected evil of everyone impartially. At noon one of his men came

to him crying, to tell him that his wife had just died after a short illness; and the master, whose kindness and humanity was known far and wide, had nothing to say to him, but 'You're better without her, my lad; you're better without her.'

Shortly afterwards a person called to ask for a donation to some local charity, to which Laurence always subscribed freely; but to-day he refused to give a penny. 'I have no proof whatever that the money you receive is applied to the object you specify; very likely your treasurer robs you of the funds of the charity,' he said. A little later on this wretched day a poor tenant, to whom he had been most kind and considerate, called to beg a few weeks' grace to pay his rent, and without asking him a single question he abruptly gave him notice, and the man turned away broken-hearted, for he had a large little family to maintain. Laurence was miserable himself, and was very success-

fully endeavouring to make others miserable also.

In the evening he was walking on the furthest boundary of his farm, feeling hard and cold, and dissatisfied with everyone's work that day, but chiefly with his own, when he heard a sharp cry of pain from a child on the road, and he welcomed it as a diversion from his bitter thoughts, and leapt over the gate and ran to see what was the matter. The cry proceeded from a little girl of three years of age, who had cut her small bare foot on a broken bottle hid in the rank grass by the wayside, and who was screaming as much with terror as with pain, at sight of the blood that was flowing freely. Laurence took the frightened little creature in his arms, speaking to her with the utmost gentleness, carried her to the brook, where he bathed her foot, and, tearing his handkerchief into strips, bound up the cut with it, while he talked to the child and beguiled her from the

thought of her pain. He knew the name of every child on the estate, and when he had comforted and quieted her he said, 'Now Nanny, I am going to carry you home, and, mind, you mustn't cry, because you're better now, and you'll frighten your mother if you cry;' and he took the child in his arms and set off across the fields, whistling to himself as he carried his unwonted burden. He stopped at Nanny's cottage, where the door stood open, and he gave the child to her mother, who seemed in some trouble or other, for her eyes were red with crying, and she was still wiping away the tears.

'It was your husband I gave notice to to-day,' said Laurence, abruptly, when the woman had thanked him for his kindness to her little girl.

'It was, sir,' she said; and those irritating feminine tears began to flow again.

'Then tell him I didn't mean it. He can stay on and take his time about the rent;'

and, without waiting to be thanked, he was gone.

For a man of Laurence Temple's habitual kindness, humanity, and consideration for others, he had strangely belied himself that day, and he thought, 'Helen would not believe I could be such a brute.'

In the morning Laurence gave Hester orders to pack up everything that belonged to her mistress, to remove every vestige and trace of her presence from the house, and to get all ready to be sent away by rail. The servant was dying of curiosity to know what it meant, where her mistress was, and why she did not come home again; but there was that in the master's face that forbade questions, and there was nothing for it but to set about doing his bidding in silence.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LAURENCE TO THE RESCUE.

Several days of careful consideration only brought Laurence back to the thought from which he had at first revolted. There could be no question that, as things were, it would be best for Bessie that she should be divorced, that she might become Job Tolley's wife as soon as the legal time expired, and that she ought to spend the intervening period under the care of her parents. The miserable affair admitted of no doubt. It was proved on the face of it; it would be easy to win his case, or Bessie's case, as he regarded it, because he was innocent in the matter, and only anxious to place her in a safer position than her present precarious one. Laurence refused to

consider himself dishonoured by what had happened. The dishonour rested with his wife and her lover, and not with him, whose fault, or folly, was that he had idealised a very frail and heartless woman, had loved her too well, and trusted her implicitly. Dishonour attaches to the betrayer, not to the betrayed, and he was able to come to the rescue with clean hands, to try to do what was yet possible for his poor Bessie. In place of the old love he had borne her, which would have stung him to madness with jealousy, he was full of urgent compassion for his young wife, such as he would feel if he saw her drowning beyond his reach where he could only throw her a rope to cling to. The best thing would be to send Mrs. Jarvis to her daughter, to tell her that steps would be taken for a divorce, and that her only safe and wise plan would be to live quietly with her parents till the time when she could be legally married to her lover.

Laurence had intended never to meet Bessie's father and mother again, but now he found himself planning a journey to Shelton, for the express purpose of seeing them both. This was forced upon him by Mrs. Jarvis's incapacity to write a coherent letter, or to understand an explicit statement in writing. Laurence could not make her understand his meaning in a letter, and, if she were to write her impression of it to Bessie, it would simply darken counsel by a garbled statement of Mrs. Jarvis's own misapprehension. But by word of mouth the old people would readily take his meaning, and Mrs. Jarvis must go at once to Bessie and make all plain to her.

When Laurence had thought the matter over and looked at it in all its terrible and sad aspects, till his mind had lost its first sense of horror, and he had fully determined what he ought to do, then he set out for Shelton. It was not necessary to send word

that he was coming ; he was sure to find Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis at home.

It was growing dusk on a bitterly cold evening, as Laurence hastened along the familiar road leading to the nursery gardens. Light showers of fine snow fell at intervals, and lay white and dry, like powdered salt, upon the road, and there was the indescribable bleak smell of spring in the air. Laurence drew his hat over his eyes and hurried forward through the wind and snow with bowed head, when he almost ran against a woman who was walking swiftly in the opposite direction. He started aside and looked up, and their eyes met.

'Bessie!'

'Mr. Temple!'

He would rather have gone to the ends of the earth than have seen her again, and his first instinct, like hers, was to pass on rapidly. But he could not. She had been his wife, his Bessie, though she was so no more, but her

pale face and eyes heavy with weeping went to his heart. Every angry feeling she had roused in him died out at the sight. Never in her pride and happiness had she looked as beautiful as now in her sorrow and dejection, and her uplifted eyes filled with unshed tears made Laurence think of the *mater dolorosa*. He trembled as he stood before her. He longed to comfort her, but it was impossible; her sorrow was beyond his power to soothe.

'What brings you here, Bessie?' he asked in a voice that shook in spite of his efforts to control it.

Then came such an outburst of grief as shocked and terrified him. She flung herself on her knees before him in the snow, and wringing his hands hard in hers she said with choking sobs: 'Job Tolley's sent me away, he's tired of me, and I've come home, and father's turned me out, he has, and I've nowhere to go.'

Laurence raised her from her knees with the passionless kindness of a brother towards a sister, and supported her gently till the storm of weeping had exhausted itself.

'My poor child,' he said in a low voice, 'my poor child, try not to weep so. It is terrible. But I will go with you to your father; he must take his child in. And you know I would never let you want,' and he gave her his arm, which she took very humbly, still crying bitterly but quietly.

Did she remember in her misery that she had deprived that strong arm of the right to protect her, that she had done the greatest possible wrong to the man by her side? But Bessie's tears were not tears of penitence; they were shed for self-pity, and from the sense of injustice and injury under which she smarted. When she had grown calm again she withdrew her hand from Laurence's arm, and said simply:

'I ought not to be telling my troubles to

you, but I haven't a friend to speak to. No one cares for me, and I hate everybody. Job sent me away because he is going to marry Mrs. Stott, his old master's widow, with lots of money, and ten years older than he is. He told me to leave him because I wasn't respectable! But whatever he calls me I'm what he's made me,' and Bessie's pale face flushed angrily, and she clenched her hands. She had never heard Laurence swear, but he said emphatically, 'Damn him!'

'Oh, if father won't take me in, what will become of me!' and Bessie began to weep afresh.

'Your father shall take you in,' said Laurence firmly. 'Wait for a minute by the gate, and I will run into the house and prepare him to receive you, for he must and shall do it.'

While they had been speaking together on the road, indoors her mother was pleading Bessie's cause with the eloquence that comes

of strong feeling, but her father seemed as little likely to be moved by his wife's entreaties as he had been by his daughter's tears.

'O Terah, it isn't only the house door that you've shut on the child, it's the door of hope and mercy! Open it, I tell you, open it!' and she flung herself against the door, and tried to tear his hands from the lock, but the old man's strength was too much for her, and he pushed her roughly aside.

'Never!' he said, 'never! There's things a man can forgive, and there's things he can't forgive, and no child o' mine that's brought shame and disgrace on her home past mending ever comes in at that door again.'

'O father, you forgave Harriett, and she shamed us! Can't you forgive Bessie too?' pleaded the poor mother, with streaming eyes.

'Harriett and Bessie isn't to be named in

the same day. Can't you see for yourself, woman? Harriett's was a sin o' young blood, and least said about it's soonest mended; but Bessie's a wedded wife wi' a husband that, if he wasn't her sort, was her lawful husband. She's disgraced us that never had such doings in our family. No, Bessie's broke wedlock, and that's a sin in wives as is damned here and hereafter.'

'O Terah, if it's as bad wi' my poor girl as you say, if you've got a father's heart in your breast, you'll let her creep in and find a place to hid her head in under the roof where she was born! If you keep that door shut on your own child, and she comes to earn her bitter bread on the streets, it's her own father 'll have drove her to it.'

An uncertain, troubled expression came over Terah's hard face, his hand trembled on the latch, and his wife eagerly followed up the impression she had made.

'O father, you've opened that door as is

locked so cruel now to let your little Bessie toddle out i' the garden when she was too short to reach the latch herself! You know how proud you was of her curly head—Harriett's was dark and Bessie's was light, and you'd used to say as you liked the fair hair best, it put you in mind of the little sister that died when you was a lad. It's the very same Bessie now as you've turned out of her home!' and Mrs. Jarvis laid an imploring hand on her husband's arm.

'Not the very same Bessie,' said Terah sadly shaking his head. 'She's broke my heart, that girl has. I shall never feel pride in child o' mine again, and I wish she'd died when she was as innocent as she looked.'

'O Terah, do but open the door!' cried the poor mother in an agony of impatience; 'do but open the door, and I'll tell her it's her father as has done it for her! She's not been as good a girl to you as I should ha' wished her to be, but she'll come to know as

her father's love is the only man's love she can trust to in this world. Father, it's her knocking! She knowed you couldn't have the heart to shut her out,' and Mrs. Jarvis snatched her husband's irresolute hand from the latch, unlocked the door, and flung it open to admit her child.

But she started back with a cry of dismay, and her arms that were extended to embrace her daughter fell nerveless, when, instead of Bessie, Laurence Temple stood before her in the porch, white with the drifting snow. The old fear of Laurence that Mrs. Jarvis had always felt returned upon her a hundredfold as she looked in his grave face with its inscrutable expression, and remembered all he had gone through since she had last seen him on his wedding-day. She could not speak, and Laurence entered the house unbidden, the light snow falling from his coat and melting on the tiled floor.

Terah was about to close the door after

him, when Laurence spoke, even before Mrs. Jarvis had time to say a word.

'Don't shut the door,' he said, firmly; 'it has been shut too long already. Your daughter is outside, and waiting to come in.'

The last time he stood there he had called Bessie 'my wife,' as though her relationship to her parents was a very secondary thing; but now he spoke of her as 'your daughter,' making her father and mother feel that he was no longer responsible for her, but committed her to their care.

'It's none o' my doings that the girl has been shut out; I'll go in the garden to her and bring her in myself,' and throwing her apron over her head Mrs. Jarvis ran out into the snow with the alacrity of a young woman, crying, 'Bessie! Bessie!'

When the two men were alone in the kitchen, Terah Jarvis was the first to speak. 'It's not for me to ask you how you come here to-night so sudden, sir, for I stand before

you in shame,' and he looked an old man as he spoke, with bowed head and bent shoulders, as though he carried a heavy load. 'I turned my own child out o' doors for her wicked doings, if it's any satisfaction to you to know, sir, and a man can't do more than that,' and he looked up anxiously at Laurence with his ferrety eyes.

'Mr. Jarvis, you must let your daughter return to her home; you have no right to send her away. She has nowhere else to go,' and the words were so inexpressibly forlorn that a lump came in Laurence's throat as he uttered them.

'Aye, she's flung herself out of her husband's home; but she's been paid out for it, sir, she's been paid out for it. That damned scoundrel as she went with's tired of her a'ready, and he's left her same as she left you. But I turned her out o' the house to teach her to know what she's been doing.'

'Your daughter is in a very forlorn and

pitiable state—don't make it worse for her than it is by being harsh with her,' said Laurence earnestly. 'You can see that she still loves her parents, because she has returned to you of her own free will; try to make the best of it, and receive her and forgive her.'

It was asking a dread deal of the old man, and he could not reply at once, but that the husband against whom his daughter had sinned so greatly should plead her cause with him struck Terah immensely. He did not understand it; he wondered what it meant, and he even suspected that Laurence's troubles had turned his brain.

'Well, sir, if you can forgive her, you'd suppose I might, too? But which of us has she hurt most? I'm an old man, and she's taken the joy out o' my life, so as I shan't hold up my head no more, and you're a young man wi' life before you, and some day belike you'll meet with a better woman than

our Bessie for your wife, and it'll be easier for you than for me in the long run,' and Terah's small eyes were dim with tears, the very distillation of bitterness.

'It is impossible to say which of us suffers most from this blow,' said Laurence quietly, 'but your duty in the matter is perfectly plain. You must take your daughter under your care, and try to shelter her from further evil and harm. It shall be no expense to you to have her at home again—I shall see to that. You and her mother are all she has to look to, and she is as much your child now as when she was innocent and good. I think the relation of parent and child is a better one than that of husband and wife, because there are things that break wedlock and dissolve the tie between man and wife, but nothing that your child can do can make her not your child, or destroy your love for her. You may be angry with her, and justly angry, but that will pass and leave nothing but love

and pity;' and Laurence had put himself so completely in the old man's place, that for the time he had forgotten his own grievance.

'You might have been a father yourself, sir,' said Terah, in simple astonishment.

'If I had been,' said Laurence, sighing, 'I do not think you and I should have been in such trouble to-day. But I must not keep Mrs. Jarvis and your daughter waiting any longer. I hear them in the porch, and they don't like to come in while I am here. I will leave through the back garden, so that you can let them in at once. Good-bye, Mr. Jarvis, I have your word for it that you'll be kind to Bessie?' And Laurence offered him his hand, which he took awkwardly enough.

'Yes, sir, you've put it before me so as it seems right and nateral to be done. We'll take our poor girl back, and do what we can for her, for she's ruined herself. There's no one here as she can harm; me and her mother's too old to learn her ways, and little

Jack isn't a girl to grow up and take pattern by her. Me and Mrs. Jarvis 'll talk to her for her good ; we'll tell her very plain what she's done, and what she is ; we'll teach her to know herself. She shall hear the truth from us, I promise you, Mr. Temple ; ' and Laurence left the house by one door as Mrs. Jarvis entered by the other, leading the weeping Bessie by the hand.

With Terah Jarvis's last words ringing in his ears, Laurence thought to himself, ' God help poor Bessie ! May she never have to say " My punishment is greater than I can bear," for though the righteous may smite her friendly, they know how to deal heavy blows ! '

CHAPTER XXXVII.

'POOR BESSIE.'

Terah Jarvis was as good as his word, and, in the fulfilment of their painful duty, he and his wife did not cease, in season and out of season, to reproach and upbraid their unhappy daughter for her sin. They did it conscientiously, thoroughly, and unceasingly, and if they had expended half as much pains on Bessie's bringing up as they did in pointing out to her the evil of her ways, she would never have gone astray. Sundry stings of conscience that her mother felt for neglect of duty towards her daughter, in not having restrained her and taught her to be obedient when she was a child, gave additional point

to her present displeasure and disapproval. And Terah, in the bitterness of his heart, scolded his wife as well as Bessie, and told her it was her fault that their girls had turned out badly.

Furthermore, in his rectitude he began to boast of the chastity of the women of his own family, asserting that the evil strain was a fresh one among the Jarvises, and citing his own mother, and his Aunt Millichip and her daughters, in proof of the truth of his assertion. But this was more than Mrs. Jarvis could bear, and she fired up at once.

'Well, Mr. Jarvis, that's the first time as I've heard you hold up your Aunt Millichip for a pattern, though I have heard you say as she and her daughters 'ud save you something in mawkins to frighten the birds with if they was to come and stay here. With their faces they couldn't ha' gone wrong if they'd tried to, and if you'd wanted daughters like

them, it 'ud ha' been easy to ha' took and married one o' your cousins and seed what come of it.'

Terah was so irritable in temper, as well as broken in health by their trouble, that he attributed to his daughter, justly or unjustly, every misfortune, great or small, that happened to them at home. Little Jack took the measles severely, and his grandfather said that troubles never came singly, and if Bessie hadn't given them all a peck o' trouble to begin with, this wouldn't have followed. Then he had to drop the rent of his cottages another threepence a week, and that was entirely owing to his being so 'moithered' in his head with trouble, that he hadn't been able to look sharp after his tenants as he used to. Terah Jarvis even went so far as to charge his daughter, by implication, with being the cause of the present sunless and rainy season; at least they never had had summers like this till she disgraced her home.

A better woman than Bessie would have found it hard to endure such incessant rebuke, both merited and unmerited. There was nothing in her parents' well-meant, but wholly injudicious, exhortations that could touch her heart or lead her to repentance. On the contrary, they irritated and then hardened her; they kept her perpetually on the defensive, and between her bitter resentment of Job Tolley's cruelty, and her father and mother's ceaseless faultfinding, Bessie only felt that she was an abominably ill-used woman. She was too much absorbed in her own sufferings to be sorry for the pain she had inflicted on her husband, and the harsh treatment she had since met with prevented her from seeing her gross ingratitude to him. The year and a half she had spent as Laurence's wife had been so wholly uncongenial and irksome to her, that with her pleasure-loving nature she had succeeded in banishing the remembrance of it from her mind as much as possible. But

the short time she spent with Job Tolley came up to her low standard of happiness, and satisfied her completely. He had not an aim or aspiration beyond her comprehension or sympathy. He was content with her as she was, and never wished her a different or a better woman. His coarse, lively society stimulated her lethargic mind, and she regarded him as a brilliant being.

Bessie had worked hard and cheerfully for him ; they had kept no servant, and she took a pride in making their rooms clean and bright, and in cooking him savoury suppers, such as her mother used to invite him to in the old days ; after which she mixed him a glass of the hot punch, that McDiggen taught her father to make, and she always tasted some of it herself, to be sure that it was properly flavoured. Sometimes Job took her to the theatre in the evening, and her life was merry and amusing, and untroubled either by memories of the past, or anticipations of the

future. But all was changed from the time that he renewed his intimacy with his late employer's widow, and there came a dreadful day when Job was taken virtuous, in prospect of marrying the well-to-do widow, repudiated Bessie for her want of respectability, and sent her away desolate.

Bessie was simply crushed by the cruelty, the irony of it. Job had been afraid of a scene with her when he told her he was about to settle and become a respectable married man, and he expected to have some difficulty in getting rid of her. But she listened to all he had to say—and how mean it sounded even Job Tolley had an uncomfortable suspicion—in horrified, breathless silence. She did not storm, or entreat, or expostulate, she merely did as he bade her—she went; and at night when Job returned to his lodgings there was no trace of her presence except the comfortable supper she had prepared and set out for him, and he ate it with a good appetite, think-

ing meanwhile of the widow Stott and her property.

Yet Bessie did not join in her parents' denunciations of Job Tolley. In her heart a slow, smouldering hatred was kindled against him, too deep for words, and she let the old people rave on against him unheeded.

'That gel's as hard as a stone, I do believe,' said Mrs. Jarvis to her husband; 'she don't say nothing when I tell her she'd ought to go down on her bended knees to Mr. Temple that she's behaved shameful to; and when I say p'r'aps Tolley's used her no worse than what she deserved, it's all the same, not a word to be got out of her, and not the manners to answer a plain question when I put it to her.'

Bessie had not even the spirit left to quarrel with her mother, or to scold little Jack. Her whole nature was benumbed with misery. Day and night she brooded over the injury done to her, till she felt as though she

must go mad. In the whole creation there existed but two beings for her, herself and Job Tolley, and he had despised her, cast her away and ruined her. She grew to hate him with a murderous hatred, and she sharpened an old clasp-knife of her father's and carried it always in her pocket. She would have sheathed it in Job's heart if she had ever met him again. Bessie seldom left the house, and she saw no one but her parents. The only time she had ventured as far as Shelton, she hurried home again in a passion of rage and astonishment. She had not understood how her neighbours regarded her, till she found young men speaking to her with impudent familiarity, and women coldly withdrawing themselves from her company. In the pain of this new experience, Bessie complained to her father that two young men, who were strangers to her, had spoken insolently to her in the market-place, and she thought manners were changed for the worse in Shelton.

'Nay, my lass,' said her father, speaking for her good, 'you're putting the cart before the horse. It's not Shelton manners that's changed, it's you that's changed, and no young man thinks it rude to speak to the likes of you. It's what you've got to put up with, and be glad it's no worse, and live quiet and respectable with your mother and me, till folks can see as you're sorry for what you've done, and then perhaps some day they'll forget, and treat you like a decent woman again. Don't you go nowhere in public till this 'ere is blowed over; but you may go to church with your mother and little Jack, for you won't meet many young men there, and may be it'll do you good, for the Lord looks at things different from what we can afford to.'

But Bessie declined to go to church, and, instead, insisted on cooking the Sunday dinner and spending the whole day in a print gown. She had lost all pleasure in finery, and even in

neatness. Her looking-glass might be thick with dust so far as she was concerned, and her mother was shocked to see her going about with unbrushed hair, and with unmended tears in her dress. Bessie would have made away with herself if she dared, but she had not the courage. It was not the thought of the hereafter that deterred her from suicide, for her imagination was too dull to conceive of any but mundane hopes and fears; but it was the physical pain of death from which she shrank, and she could not bear to hurt the sleek, well-nourished body she had loved and tended so carefully. Often she stood on the bank of the river with a hard and heavy heart and a burning brain, prayerless and heartless, fast bound in the egotism of her own dumb misery, longing to plunge into its cold depths, and leave a world that she found so wretched. But the thought of the death-struggle in the water was too horrible, and life under any circumstances—mere life and the power of drawing a

deep breath—seemed intensely precious. But as soon as the vivid impression of horror had faded, dull misery and a loathing of life settled down upon her again with crushing weight.

But a change came over Bessie in one respect that was very welcome to her mother. From being the idlest of young women she had become the most industrious and hard-working. A feverish activity possessed her from morning till night. She cooked, she baked, she washed, she scrubbed, no task was too hard nor too menial for her to undertake with alacrity. When night came, then she received her reward, for she flung herself just as she was, worn-out and weary across her bed, and slept a heavy dreamless sleep. It was for this that she worked so hard all day, that she might sleep at night from sheer fatigue, for her wakeful nights were driving her mad. She could bear anything but the long, dark hours of consuming regrets and corroding hatred.

One afternoon Mrs. Jarvis noticed how ill

Bessie was looking. She was growing thin, and the dark shadows under her eyes were in startling contrast to the pallor of her face.

'Have a cup o' tea, child; you look quite done over,' said her mother kindly. 'You want the fresh air, you keep too close i' the house. Go and take a walk on the Shelton road, and little Jack shall go along for company.'

'No, mother, I want no one with me, and I shan't be out long; but I do want a walk, or something, I don't know what I want, but I'll go out for half an hour.'

Bessie changed her dress, a thing she had not done for some time past, and made herself look more like her former self, and her mother smiled approval on this token of renewed interest in life, as she took it to mean. It was a bright summer's afternoon, in a brilliant interval between heavy showers, when Bessie stepped out of her father's garden on the Shelton road. She loathed every step of the

way, familiar to her all her life, and poisoned to her by bitter memories. How was she ever to forget when, indoors and out of doors, there was not an object or a spot her eye could light upon, but roused a train of memories too sad to be endured? She thought she would like to go far away to some strange place, where she knew nobody and nobody knew her, and where there was no river, nor hills, nor anything like the country she had learned to hate, or that could remind her of old times. The very trees she had played under when she was a child seemed waving their boughs as if they pointed scornfully at her, and the birds chirped and twittered offensively. Bessie had never seen so much to hate in so short a space. All the sweet sounds of nature jarred her, she was out of tune with heaven and earth.

Lost in her own dreary thoughts Bessie pursued her way with downcast head, when, suddenly lifting her eyes, she saw some twenty

yards from her Amelia Harbottle, walking swiftly towards her, and, unless one of them turned back, they must meet as they passed on the narrow path. Bessie scorned to turn an inch out of her way to avoid anyone; but as they drew near she felt the blood rush to her face in a surge of blushing that scorched like fire. They passed so close to one another that their dresses touched; and as they did so Amelia drew her skirt aside from the contact with a gesture that hurt Bessie to the soul. She gave her dress a little shake, as though to remove some palpable defilement, and no spoken words of the bitterest human malignity could have expressed so much, or have inflicted so deep a wound. The cruel, mute contempt of a fellow-woman was more terrible to Bessie than the judgment of God or the censure of man. Bessie did not walk for the half hour she had promised her mother, but at once hastened home with pale face and trembling steps.

'I can't bear it any longer,' she said, as she burst into the kitchen and threw off her bonnet. 'I can't bear it, mother; I must go somewhere away from here. I want to go where it's all strange to me, and nobody knows me!'

'Why, whatever's come over you so sudden? The fresh air 's like got into your head. Where do you want to go?'

'I'll go to Manchester, and see Harriett. I've never been there, and we haven't seen each other for years.'

'You'd better write and see if she can do with you for a bit.'

'No, mother, I can't wait to have letters answered. I'll write to-night to say I'm coming to-morrow, and if she can't do with me when I get there I'll come straight back to you again.'

'Oh, it's not Harriett I was thinking of,' said Mrs. Jarvis; 'she'll be glad enough to see you; it's Morgan I'm thinking of. Her

husband's very strict, and he's very particular who her friends are.'

'I haven't time to think about such nonsense as that, mother,' said Bessie, with a dry smile. 'If he wasn't too particular to marry Harriett, it's too late for him to be taken like that now.'

The next day Bessie went to her sister's, and, on the whole, her parents were inclined to think that it was the best thing she could do. She had vehemently longed for change, and certainly she found it in Manchester, where the very air and sky were different from anything she had breathed or seen before. She had left Shelton in warmth and sunshine, and in the dreary northern town she found chilly rain and soot-flakes falling about equally thickly. She looked with amazement at the huge factories with sky-piercing chimneys vomiting forth smoke, and warehouses many storeys high looming above the sordid streets —immense without being imposing, and

vast without dignity—very nightmares in bricks and mortar. Did Harriett, she wondered, live under the shadow of one of these huge mills, vibrating to the rattle and clack of machinery, and radiating far and wide an atmosphere of hot grease? How she must long for the peace, and sweetness, and cleanliness of the country! But the Morgans lived a couple of miles or more from the grimy, sordid-looking city with its thronged pavements black with greasy mud, in a place equally hideous, but of a quiet and dejected type of ugliness. Harriett's house was in a new street of small two-storey houses, all precisely alike; and between every two ran a narrow flagged passage leading to the paved back yard, down which rushed a blast of cold wind, bringing with it the sound of pumping, the coarse shouts of children at play, and the loud flapping of linen blown about on the clothes line. It was washing-day in the little street, and the unusual sound of a fly stopping

at Mrs. Morgan's front door brought everyone who was not up to the elbows in suds, and some few who were, running down the entries to see who the visitor might be.

The driver set Bessie's small box on the front step, and, lifting the knocker as high as it would go, and letting it fall with a bang on the door by way of announcing her arrival, pocketed his fare without saying 'Thank you,' and drove away, leaving her still waiting for the door to be opened.

As Bessie continued to wait, a woman who had been watching the whole proceeding from over the way with the keenest interest, ran with fluttering petticoats down the windy passage, crossed the road, and said, as she wiped the suds from her arms with her apron, 'Mrs. Morgan is shut up i' th' wash-house; hoo can't hear you knock. Yo' should pluck th' bell.'

'I should do *what*?' asked Bessie, who could hardly understand a word she said.

'A said yo' should pluck th' bell,' and she illustrated her dark speech by ringing a loud peal on the bell Bessie had not noticed.

The sound pierced into some remote back premises, where Harriett and a large bony woman were busy at the wash-tub, and the front door was soon opened by Mrs. Morgan, who had hastily dried her hands on her apron, and left bracelets of soap suds on her wrists. The sisters met kindly enough after their long separation, and Harriett inquired eagerly after little Jack. She had had four children since she was married, but she clung to the belief that her firstborn was cleverer and handsomer than any of them.

'Morgan's away at his mother's for ten days,' said Harriett, when she had asked after her father and mother; 'he's gone for a change. We've had a deal of sickness this summer, and he's had the scarlet fever; but he didn't have it badly, and he'll come home all right.'

'The scarlet fever!' said Bessie, growing pale; 'why, that's catching!'

'Oh, you needn't be afraid, none of us has taken it but the baby, and she had it very light; she's almost well by now.'

And then Harriett, having, as a matron, given due precedence to her own affairs, began to question Bessie about hers, of which she had been but imperfectly informed by her mother. Mrs. Morgan was for taking very high ground with her sister, and rating her soundly, but she disarmed her by saying, 'I've not come all this way to be scolded by you, Harriett, not to stay long with you; and while I'm here I can work for you hard and willing. You needn't have a woman to wash while I'm here, for I'm strong if I'm nothing else. Don't scold me; they do it all day long at home, and it's waste breath, and aggravating too.'

Harriett had a kind heart, and there was something in her sister's sad, handsome face

that moved her strangely, and she rose and kissed her.

'I don't want you to slave for me, I'm sure; and p'r'aps it's rather like the pot calling the kettle black for me to scold you; but if I'd had the luck to be married to a gentleman—and but for little Jack it might ha' been me as likely as you—I wouldn't ha' served him as you've served Mr. Temple; no, not for all the Job Tolleys there is. You've been a bad gel, Bessie, a real bad gel.' And Bessie did not deny it.

She had spoken the truth when she told her sister she should not stay with her long, though she did not know how soon she should leave, nor under what circumstances. She had not been with Harriett more than a few days when she sickened of the fever from which the baby was only partly recovered, and she took the illness in its worst and severest form. Bessie was strong in body but broken in spirit, and she seemed powerless to

resist the fierce disease that ran riot in her young frame. She was only ill a few days. She did not ask for her father or her mother, and when Harriett suggested that they should be sent for, she said, 'No, no; I've given them trouble enough, but for all that it would hurt them to see me die.' On the day of her death, in a brief interval of consciousness, she said to her sister, 'There's a big clasp-knife in my dress pocket; throw it away, throw it right away.'

As the shadows were closing round her, and breath and speech were almost gone, she whispered by a supreme effort, 'Tell Mr. Temple, if he'd care to hear from such as me, tell him I bless him for his forgiveness. As he's forgiven me, I hope God will forgive me too.'

Again Laurence received a letter from Mrs. Jarvis, tear-stained and written on black-edged paper; but its contents did not distress him as the former had done. How thankful

he was that he had let the question of the divorce rest since Bessie had gone home to her father and mother, and that he had not published his young wife's degradation to the cruel, gossiping world! When he finished the letter his eyes were moist with tears.

Mrs. Jarvis wrote: 'We don't rightly know what name to give her on her gravestone, for after what's happened we didn't like to call her by your name; so we're just going to put "Poor Bessie," and nothing more; for that can give no offence, and it's true.'

'Poor Bessie!' said Laurence, 'may God forgive thee, as I do.'

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

BORRADALE'S CONFESSION.

Laurence Temple still lives at Pine Hill and pursues his agricultural experiments, losing a great deal of money in the process, but at the same time gaining knowledge, and as that is his first object he is content, being well aware that he who would buy experience must pay largely for the commodity.

Yet to look at Laurence one might suppose that his fortunes were in the ascendant, for he wears a bright and confident air, and there is an expression of tranquil happiness and power in his face. He has had a hot afternoon's work superintending sheep-washing with his men, but he has no look of anxiety or care, and when, as he enters the house, he hears

a sound that never used to be heard at Pine Hill, though the drawing-room at Poges Court has often echoed to it, he smiles with profound content. To this day Laurence cannot clearly distinguish one tune from another, but it is enough for him that it is Helen, his wife, who is playing the piano, and though to his ear it is nothing but a jangle of sounds she produces, for her sake it is a harmonious jangle. They cannot give a very clear account of how they came to be married. It was so natural, so inevitable, their love was like the opening of the buds in spring, that in accordance with the law of their being must unfold, be it early or late.

Mrs. Stapleton was ready to sing 'Nunc Dimittis' on the day of the wedding when she saw her beloved brother in his sober senses at last, and married to her dear Helen; but 'Why, oh why,' she asked her husband, 'did he make his first wild marriage, and waste so much precious time?'

Helen's uncle and aunt put no serious difficulty in the way of the lovers, though Laurence's ideas, where they did not strike them as contemptible, were thoroughly repugnant to them.

Sir Stoke apparently viewed his niece's engagement from a sanitary point of view, for when announcing it to his friends he inflated his lungs with a deep breath and said, 'Helen will have more fresh air when she leaves her aunt—more fresh air.' Lady Poges' consent was not so freely given as her husband's. It had to be tempered for Helen's benefit by reflections on Laurence's past life, and by the expression of a not very sanguine hope that in future he might sin no more against the unwritten social laws. She insisted that his marriage with Bessie Jarvis was a disgraceful affair, and went so far as to say that it was very dangerous for young ladies to suppose that reformed rakes made the best husbands, and that she trusted her niece might not be disappointed.

But Helen was much too happy to resent anything that her aunt could say about Laurence. She was incapable of understanding his motives, and it was useless to try to explain them to her. But what Lady Poges found most difficult to consent to was that Laurence should take her niece to live in a 'cottage,' which she chose to imagine as a place with a damp brick floor, and the front door opening without reserve into the depths of domestic privacy, and with the pig trotting in and out cheerfully all the day long.

'I cannot come to see you in a cottage, my love, and even if with my weak health I braced myself for the effort, Timmins, I know, would refuse to come with me, and I cannot travel without her.'

'Well, never mind, auntie; Laurence and I will come to see you instead, and uncle can return the visit, and tell you if the cottage is really such a terrible place as you think.'

The wedding was a quiet one, as became

a bride whose adopted mother was too much of an invalid to be present at the ceremony, and a bridegroom who was a widower of somewhat recent date. The only noteworthy circumstance attending it was the absence of Laurence's dearest friend, Tom Borradale. He ought to have been there; it did not seem right for him to be away, and yet he declined to come, even though Lady Poges and Mrs. Stapleton, both of whom had made his acquaintance the summer before and liked him exceedingly, had asked him to be their visitor for the occasion. No one wrote so hearty a letter of congratulation to Laurence on his engagement or sent the bride so beautiful a present as Borradale, and yet he would not come to the wedding; and his friends were grieved and somewhat resentful. But Laurence defended him, though he was puzzled by his conduct.

'Depend upon it he has some good reason for staying away. Borradale is incapable of

doing a rude thing. Odd he always is, and will be, I hope, but never wanting in courtesy, and when next I see him he is sure to tell me why he does not come to us now.'

Dick Norton and his wife were at the wedding, but they were not a reassuring sight for the newly-married; for such brightness as Norton had ever possessed was utterly quenched by his wife, a large, dull young woman, warranted to abstract the light-heartedness, the gaiety, the abandon from any average young man.

Shortly after Laurence returned from his wedding tour in Italy he was in London on business, and he looked in upon Borradale at his chambers. The greeting between the two friends was as cordial as ever, and Borradale was very amusing about his improved prospects, for he had that morning received his third brief.

'You see, my dear fellow, if you mean to get on in the world you must pitch your

ambition high, and I've made up my mind before I die to attain to that point of financial success at which I shall be able to pay the office boy out of my professional income;' and Borradale spread his brief before him with intense gravity, and Laurence laughed heartily.

'Nice rooms, aren't they?' said Borradale, as he noticed his friend looking about him; and he rose and opened one of the windows, and lighted the inevitable cigar.

'Yes; I like them very much. And what splendid trees you have quite close to you.'

'I should think I have, indeed. They and the dirty little children who play in the gardens in the evening are a great delight to me. On that big bough there a thrush has built a nest, and I amuse myself by shying bits of bread into it, and watching the young birds fight over it. It's all humbug about little birds in their nests agreeing; they do nothing of the kind, and I witness

shocking sights from my windows;' and Borradale rattled on in an elaborately casual style.

Suddenly he turned towards Laurence. 'How is Mrs. Temple?' he said.

'Oh, splendidly well and bright. Why don't you come to Pine Hill and see what a wonderful housewife and farmer's wife she makes? And while I think of it, old fellow, why wouldn't you come and help to marry us? You would have lent a hand at a good work, and Helen really missed you.'

'Did she?' said Borradale dreamily, and his swarthy face grew red. 'Oh, yes, I'll tell you why I didn't go to your wedding. I meant to tell you some day, and I may as well do it soon as late. Hang it, Temple, why don't you smoke? You've no idea how uncomfortable it is when you've something to say to a fellow, and you're smoking and he is not. I want your attention, certainly, but not concentrated upon me; so divide it between

me and a cigar for once in a way, there's a good fellow.'

As Laurence saw that his friend really wished him to smoke, and that his manner was strangely nervous, he did as he desired, and took a cigar.

'That's right; now we are equal. So you want to know why I appeared so churlish in not accepting the kind invitations I received to your wedding?'

'Yes, if it is not an impertinent question, I should be glad to know.'

'Then I'll tell you plainly. I fell in love with Helen Wentworth from the moment I first met her, and I could not see her married to you. There, don't speak. I don't want to hear a word about it, but that's the fact. I knew I should get over it—I suppose one always does get over these things—but I vowed that, God helping me, I would never see her again till I could meet her as your wife, and wish you both honestly all happi-

ness; and I could not have done that on your wedding day—so I stayed away.'

'My dear Borradale, if I could only have guessed such a thing! What pain I must have given you when I kept writing to urge you to come!'

'Of course you hurt me; but never mind that; only, why shouldn't you have guessed that I, too, might have fallen in love with Helen? Do you suppose you are the only man likely to do that?' and Borradale looked at his friend in an odd, inquiring way, that made him feel uncomfortable.

'But I want to tell you,' he continued, 'that I went down to Coombe Delaway, ostensibly to visit your charming sister, in reality to propose to Miss Wentworth.'

The blood rushed to Laurence's face. 'You did? She has never told me a word about it.'

'Wait a bit, my dear fellow, and I will tell you all. I had gone, I say, for the express

purpose of proposing to Miss Wentworth, and fortune favoured me' — (Laurence could scarcely hear what he said for the loud beating of his heart)—' fortune favoured me, for she came to spend the day at the Manor House, and she and I walked in the rose garden together. I really can't tell you what we conversed about, for I was in a heaven of happiness merely to be near her, and I was only making talk till I could summon up courage to speak to her of the one thing that filled my soul. However, we found ourselves talking about the way in which doctors feel pulses, which I thought they did with the thumb, but Helen assured me that the right thing is to feel it with the tips of the fingers ; and she showed me how to do it, and then offered me her pretty wrist to experiment upon. I was tempted to press my lips to her white wrist, but I placed my fingers in due professional form, as she taught me how to do, and I said to her, what a remarkably quiet,

steady pulse she had. "Yes, I know," she said; "it is a sign that I shall live to a great age, because there is no wear and tear in me." "Then the opposite of that must hold good, too," I replied, "and the quick pulses soon beat themselves out; and in that case Laurence Temple won't live to be old, for he has the fastest pulse I know." Heavens! what a bound her pulse gave as I mentioned your name! No wear and tear in her? It was the most passionate throb imaginable. It was nature's own eloquence, and spoke to me as loud as thunder and as clear as lightning. How I came to have mentioned your name in our silly little talk I don't know, for you'll excuse me if I say that no one was further from my thoughts than you at that moment. But certainly it was fortunate that I did so, for it was suddenly revealed to me that Helen loved you; and I dropped her hand, and all pretensions to it, at the same moment. I did not tell her what I intended to tell her. Your wife

has not heard your friend say that he loved her. It was better so—much better. How I did hate you for a short time, to be sure!'

'I wonder you don't hate me now,' said Laurence.

'My dear fellow, if we were to begin hating others for having what we have not there would be no end to it, and we should be cutting throats all round. *Kismet*—it is fate! You have the lady and I have not; you are very lucky and I unlucky, that is all. And, besides, you know my sentiments,' said Borradale, dropping into his old bantering manner, 'you know my sentiments about women. There isn't one of them worth quarrelling about or hating an old friend for; but, mind you,' he added, very inconsistently, 'you have the sweetest and dearest and best of them all for your wife, and if you are not ready to admit a thousand times a day that neither you nor any other man ever deserved to be Helen's husband, you ought to be shot.'

'And you look ready to do it for me, Borradale.'

'I would do it with pleasure if you don't make that divine creature happy. You are a lucky fellow, Laurence! There is not a second Helen for me, and I don't think I regret it. On the whole, it suits me to adore my friend's wife, for, without a shade of disloyalty to her husband, I shall always love the vision of truth and purity she has opened up to me. Bless her!'

It was a strange revelation of himself that Borradale made to his friend, and Laurence loved him the better for it; and yet he never told Helen, after all, why Borradale had not come to their wedding, but fell back on the repetition of the safe platitude that no doubt he had good reasons for staying away.

Helen has effected many pretty changes in the aspect of things at Pine Hill. Life there is as simple as it ever was, but the household is larger, and they have been obliged to add

a couple of rooms to the cottage, and a little drawing-room where Helen can have her piano. Laurence had been busy one morning hanging some of his wife's water-colour drawings for her, when the door opened, and the two inmates of the house for whom they have had to enlarge their borders entered the room. The one is a very old friend, being no other than Mrs. Brimer herself, whom Laurence, in the goodness of his heart, had transplanted from Smokington more than two years ago, to enable Tim Ballinger to marry Nurse Tucker, which he would never have had the courage to do so long as the old woman remained on the spot. In her arms Mrs. Brimer is proudly carrying the young Laurence, Borradale's godson, the heir apparent, the Crown Prince of the establishment. He is a beautiful child of about ten months old, with a few gleaming white teeth which he tries impartially on every object within reach, from his mother's soft cheek to the handle of the fireirons, and he

has just soothed his hasty temper by a rosy sleep in his cradle blankets, and is able to submit once more to be worshipped by his parents. Mrs. Brimer is not his Babyship's nurse, a cheerful young woman fills that office, but it is her pride and delight to carry what she calls 'Master baby' downstairs.

'Well, Mrs. Brimer, and how's the baby?' Laurence asked her.

'Oh, sir, his temper do come on amazing, a pretty love! He have a sperrit!' and Helen, taking the baby from her and seating him on her lap, remarked with rapture that his hair was getting really like proper hair, instead of being indistinguishable from duckling's down. Helen had completely won Mrs. Brimer's affection. Her sweet temper, her courage and cheerfulness, and her goodness to every one with whom she came in contact made her a creature by herself in Mrs. Brimer's estimation. She even admitted to Laurence that, if there were more young women like his wife, perhaps

there would not be so much to be said against marrying; but she reached her highest point of praise when she said one day, in a burst of enthusiasm, that Mrs. Temple put her in mind of an old woman more than anything else.

Helen has seen Tim and his wife, and they both lost their hearts to her at once. She knew Tim's history from her husband, and she was touched to see the strong man, lamed for life, and walking with the aid of a stick. Tim will never be able to do hard work again, but he earns good wages as a night watchman at the iron works, a situation where integrity is of more value than bodily strength. He and his wife and Polly are a most happy little family, and Helen likes to think that, by relieving them of Mrs. Brimer, she has helped to make their happiness.

There is nothing more to be told about Laurence Temple. His life is a quiet, harmonious round of duty, a steady working with all good influences, that offers no striking points to him who likes to tell or to listen

to a story. His work is wholly constructive, tending, as he believes, towards the building up of a nobler and more simple society; he dwells among his tenants and labourers, and is the hardest-working man among them all. He is cheered and sustained by the unflagging sympathy and the loyal co-operation of his wife, whose heart is his storehouse of comfort, and her understanding a guide that will never lead him astray. Laurence has found in Helen the woman with whom to lead the ideal life; and a man needs to have steered on the wrong tack, and to have made disastrous shipwreck as he had done, before he can fully appreciate the safety and blessing of floating on calm waters at last.

THE END.

PRINTED BY
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